

MINISTRY BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE CHURCH:
FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER FOR EMPOWERING SINGLE PARENTS AND
THEIR CHILDREN IN THE RIVER PARKS TOWERS HOUSING COMPLEX

By

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ABSTRACT

MINISTRY BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE CHURCH:

Family Resource Center For Empowering Single Parents and
Their Children in the River Park Towers Housing Complex

By

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The focus of this ministry was on empowering single parents and their children to achieve an optimum level of living in an impoverished community. This community, River Park Towers is a high-rise housing complex that has a large population of single parents along with their children.

On reflecting on the social conditions of these parents, I am reminded of my own experiences as a divorced single parent of limited resources: education, lack of job training, and/or the economic empowerment to lift myself or my family from a life of depravation. Some of the ills I encountered were social and economic. Moreover, I was a victim of sexism and classism. My past economic conditions are reflected in those conditions experienced by the single parents of River Park Towers. Daily, they live a life of deprivation in an impoverished community. Having experienced inferior treatment as a single parent, I came to this project with a sense of urgency to help the community of single parents and their children to offer them encouragement and resources that would lift them from a life of depravity.

I believe my experiences as a single parent served to help transform the lives of these parents and their children. In my involvement with them and their children, I felt a sense of oneness because I identified with them and their plight; I was one of them.

In light of bridging the gap between church and community, my goal for the D. Min project was actualized as the church joined forces with the community. In doing so, the church became aware of the needs of the single parents and their children. Likewise, the single parents became aware of the resources of the church that was available to them.

In the process of unifying the church and community, both are forever changed socially and spiritually. As a result of bridging the gap between church and community, three single parents and their children became affiliated with the church. While other single parents of River Park Towers utilized the resources of the church.

Lastly, members of the Tenants' Association witnessed the positive changes in the lives of the single parents and their children as the program emphasized family togetherness. The President of the Tenants' Association enjoyed seeing the interaction of the participants. Therefore, the community has requested that the program resume in the near future. In addition, not only did the single parents benefit from the program but also their children, older parents and the seniors of the community. I am extremely proud and grateful for the success of the outcome of this project.

PREFACE

In this Demonstration Project, I followed the methodology of Liberation Theology. It is an attempt to present a picture of the reality of single parents experience in the River Park Towers housing complex of the Bronx, New York. The large population of single parents in the poverty stricken community is the focal point of this ministry. This is the basis upon which my ministry of caring for my Sisters and Brothers in this community. As a divorce single parent of two children, this program in many ways is a reflection of my own social condition. Therefore, I came to this community with a sense of urgency to assist these single parents to achieve an optimum level of living.

Feminist and Womanist Theology in this Demonstrated Project was illustrated by the reading of the familiar story of Hagar and others. In my project, I followed the simple command of the “Great Commission” found in the Gospel of Matthew, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....” (Matt. 28:19 NSRV), I believe this Scripture is the foundation for the outreach ministry of which I have been called. It is a ministry to liberate single parents theologically, socially, economically and spiritually. This ministry may be viewed as the so-called invisible institution in that wherever we gather to pray, hear the Word of God, we will experience the true liberative meaning of the Christian Gospel. Thus, the people, single parents of River Park Towers, can realize that God is wherever the community gathers to have church and to experience the Holy Spirit. This, thereby, underscores and manifests the Scripture, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” Matthew 18:20. Hence, God is where the community of believers is gathered in His/Her name.

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Thanks to my parents, the late, James and Launa White who led me on my faith journey, for encouraging me in the things of God, and telling me “ I am not faulty for falling, but for lying down, to get up and start again.” To the memory of my two brothers, James and Jack White; to the memory of my niece and nephew, Gale and Donald Koonce; to my two children, Laquita and Lorne; my granddaughter Amani, sister Clara and other family members for your support. Thank you Pastor Shirley Dowling for training and teaching me the art of preaching a liberated gospel with boldness, for your prayers and for the entire Praise Temple Church family for all of your support. To the Core Team and the Site Team, I am deeply grateful for your support. To the Tenants’ Association of River Park Towers, thank you for being a part of the Family Resource Center.

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Introduction

My demonstration project began with a “Brunch” on November 6, 2004 at Praise Temple A.M.E. Church, Bronx, New York. Prior to the “Brunch,” several flyers were distributed throughout River Park Towers inviting single parents to attend. We used the theme: In Praise of Single Parents. They were invited for a day of fun: poetry reading, short stories, music, games and sharing with each other their gifts and talents.

Only two new parents attended from River Park Towers that first day. The other attendees were from my church family. As I pondered the low turnout of single parents for the “Brunch,” I realized the need to formulate my plan of action. I met with the Site Team to discuss a new plan of action. We decided on an inclusive title for both parents and children, *River Park Towers Family Resource Center*. The following week, new flyers were made and distributed throughout River Park Towers, informing the parents of the grand opening of the Family Resource Center. I waited in great anticipation, but not for long. The single parents and their children came to see what the Family Resource Center had to offer, and they remained with us until the very end, six months later.

The incident summarizes the element of assessment and evaluation that this project employed. Assessment and evaluation of the project was built into the very structure of the project as integral elements. This allowed for rapid response, adjustment, as seen in the incident just described, and a complete rethinking of strategies. On going forward, we maintained an active assessment process.

The story of the project that eventually ensued is told in the pages that follow. This project draws upon Biblical, theological, and spiritual and historical resources from a variety of disciplines. In the end, I learned much about ministry, but also about myself. These results are from the conclusion of the Doctorate project.

Mothers are often thought of as being an endless source of love and emotional sustenance to nurture themselves and/or their children. However, single parent mothers need personal time alone to replenish themselves emotionally, socially, and spiritually. As the parents are nurtured, they gain a deeper need for love and attention to impart to their children, counteracting the effects of the insidious myth that mothers are an endless source of love and emotional sustenance. Mothers without personal time for themselves ultimately will short-change their children's social development.

Although single parents are linked intimately with their children, they are distinct as women in need of fulfilling their own destiny. Therefore, these mothers are to be viewed as individuals with lives that precede their children's lives.

The River Park Towers Family Resource Center is a small group of single parents and their children who met once a week on Saturday. The importance of this group was to meet and allow participants to be consultants one to another, as they shared specific problems and challenges, as single parents. In this support group, single parents were encouraged to discuss their frustrations, struggles, fears, joys and successes. The parents that expressed their emotional feelings and fears would often experience a wonderful emotional relief.

In the midst of shared problems among the single parents, there was encouragement to share in fun and laughter as well. The scripture supports the idea of having laughter and

fun in your life. “A cheerful heart is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs. 17:22). It has been acknowledged that having fun is a missing element in the lives of many single parents.

Incorporated in the single parent ministry were many social activities that allowed for safe supervised interaction for both parents and children. The children’s activities included computers, games and movies. Activities for the single parents included the game of “Uno,” “Spades,” “Journaling,” and a Book Club. The Book Club inspired the parents to read more with great excitement. As a group performing art together (collages), playing games, and discussing the many books we read, we developed friendships and fellowships.

In the single parent group, we gathered in a circle to discuss the issues at hand. This ministry was tailored to meet the needs of the mothers from their own perspective, rather than what I felt they needed. Sometimes it was girl talk and laughter. Other times, it was venting and Pastoral Counseling.

Our group environment was a warm setting of soft music, prayer, songs, a prepared lunch, and the reading of various kinds of literature. Thus, causing the parents to be emotionally exhilarated and better equipped to impart love, affection and attention to their children. In my demonstration project, I followed the simple command of the “Great Commission” found in the Gospel of (Matt. 28:19). “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations....” I believe this Scripture is the foundation for the outreach ministry in which I have been called. It is a ministry to liberate single parents theologically, socially, economically and spiritually, those who are living in a poverty-stricken community. This ministry may be viewed as the so-called invisible institution, in that wherever we gather to

pray, hear the Word of God; we experience the true liberating meaning of the Christian Gospel. Thus, the people, *single parents* of River Park Towers can realize that God is wherever the community gathers to have church, and to experience the Holy Spirit. This, thereby, underscores and manifests the scripture, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). Hence, God is where the community of believers is gathered in his name. Community is derived from the word ‘communis,’ meaning common and from ‘communicare,’ meaning to share or participate.¹ Jesus demonstrated community of faith as He lived in common with others, sharing and participating in God’s work. Jesus was and is engaged in the struggle to liberate humankind from every form of injustice, and has called the church to go beyond its walls to make social and spiritual changes in our society.

The mandate of the ministry beyond the walls of the church has ignited a new response from me. Rather than building programs, and assuming the church knows what is best for the community, the body of believers should inquire of the community what their needs are and seek to support them in their endeavors. This, thereby, lends support to the community.

Focusing the Project

The focus of the Doctorate of Ministry project is to address the needs of single parents of the River Park Towers complex, both males and females to promote effective parenting among these parents. However, as the project evolved only women showed an interest in the program. The large population of single parents in the poverty-stricken community is the focal point of this ministry. I contend that the assimilation of single

¹ Suzanne G. Farnham, et. al., *Listening Heart* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 1951), 53.

parent ministry in the impoverished community of River Park Towers will serve to empower these single parents in other facets of their lives as well as in the lives of their families.

The River Park Towers in the Bronx, NY

According to the U.S. Census, New York is the third largest in the nation by population. The Bronx, named for settler John Jonas Bronck, a Swedish sea captain (during the 17th Century) is the only borough of New York that is part of the mainland. The Bronx has been as area where immigrants settled since the migration of Irish and Italian railroad workers in the 1840's.² Well-known Bronxites included actors: Jennifer Lopez, Cuba Gooding, Jr., musician, Billy Joel, TV personality, Regis Philbin, and former Secretary of State, Colin Powell. The Bronx has the eighth largest black populations in the country.³

To date, the U. S. Census portrays the plight of Bronx residents as bleak, when compared to the national population. The Bronx has a population of 1.3 million who are housed in approximately 491,000 housing units. A total of 76% of the population live in renter-occupied housing units, compared with the national figure of 30% of the national population residing in renter-occupied housing units. A total of 18% of Bronx residents live owner-occupied housing units compared with 60% of the national figure. Less than 31% of the population resided in homes with a mortgage and/or second mortgage compared to 63% of the national figure paying a monthly mortgage of \$1,500.⁴

² U.S. Census Bureau 2000, State and Country, quick facts. NY. Bronx County <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36005.html>. 1

³ Ibid., 1.

⁴ Ibid.

The River Park Towers housing complex located at 55 Richman Plaza is a large urban housing development in the borough of the Bronx. It houses 1,654 residents. The complex consists of four separate towers, with a total of 162 floors that spread over two buildings with 43 floors each and two buildings that hold 38 floors each.

According to NY State Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR), River Park Towers, a federally assisted development, has a maximum income limit as a Section 8 housing complex as is given below.⁵

# Of Family Members	Extremely Low Income	Very Low Income
1	\$9,550	\$15,900
2	\$10,900	\$18,150
3	\$12,250	\$20,400
4	\$13,600	\$22,700
5	\$14,700	\$24,500
6	\$15,800	\$26,350
7	\$16,900	\$28,150
8	\$18,000	\$29,050

This chart clearly reflects the poverty in the community.

River Park Towers is also a Section 236 housing complex, meaning “Households” with income up to 95 percent of the New State’s area median (about \$60,000 for a family of four) are eligible for Section 8 vouchers, where “[t]he vouchers pay the difference between 30 percent of a tenant’s income and the market rent, without the usual rent

⁵ www.dhcr.state.ny.us/Ohm/hsgdevls/html.

ceiling.” River Park Towers is located in the 46th Precinct of the New York City Police Department, a precinct with one of the highest crime rates in the country.⁶

There is also another problem, according to the Office of the NYS Attorney General. Bronx residents in the 46th Precinct experienced a total of 9.1 stops per 1, 000 residents with 46.3% Blacks and 49.5% Latinos stopped by the police in this area. Based on these “stops” a total of 11.4% Blacks and 16.1% Latinos and 13% others were arrested, while figures for Whites are not available in this particular precinct consisting of 38% Blacks, 56.6% Latinos and 2.3% others.⁷

Based on interviews with the River Park Towers Tenants’ Association, the downward spiraling of the community may also be attributed to the housing management’s failure to properly screen applicants, spiraling rent increases, and displacement of non-working families, who either lost public assistance benefits and/or were denied rental subsidies. Furthermore, as set forth in the Attorney General’s report, less than 3% of the population is White, and many of the neighboring Irish and Jewish families have moved out of the Morris Heights community and the state.

During the 1970’s, the River Park Towers (RPT) housing complex was viewed as the forefront of housing renewal in the Bronx. During the past few years, the Bronx community has continued to struggle, while undergoing major changes in its characteristics and has become multicultural and diverse after the September 11th tragedy. However, according to the U.S. Census, the borough of the Bronx has a population of 1.3 million, while Blacks (African-American) and Latinos comprise 36% and 48% of the

⁶ www.dhcr.state.ny.us/hsgdevls/htm.

⁷ Office of New York State Attorney General, Civil Rights Bureau, “The New York City Police Department’s ‘Stop and Frisk’ Practices:” A Report to the People of the State of New York , December 1, 1999 (NY).

Bronx population. A highly populated area with 31, 000 people per square mile populate the County of the Bronx, where the average residential age is 33 years old.⁸

The poverty of Bronx residents is confirmed based on the median household income of \$27,611 compared to the national figure of \$42,000, with a per capita income of \$13,865 for Blacks and \$10,475 for Latinos. What is more devastating when viewing the family make-up of Blacks and Latinos in the Bronx is the fact that 42% of the male population has never married, compared to 30% of the national figure, while 38% of the female population had never married compared to 24% of the national figure.⁹ Furthermore, thirty-five percent (35%) of the males are married and live with a spouse compare to 53% of national figure, while 28% of the females are married, living with a spouse compared to 50% of the national figure.

The fact that a large portion of the population is married, but living without a spouse is also prevalent since 13% of the males that are married live without a spouse, compared to the national figure of 3%, while 14% of the females that are married live without a spouse compared to the national figure of 5%.¹⁰

A single parent household is defined as “[t]he child’s identified parent is not married and living with his or her spouse. This single parent may be married but the spouse is absent, including separated, widowed, divorced or never married.” Notably, 48% of Black children and 25% of Latino children live in the single parent home, while 16% of non-Hispanic White children live in a single parent home.

March 2002 statistics reflect the high population of children: 72 million children (under the age of 18 years old) reside in the United States of America. A total of 337,315

⁸ New York City Independent Budget Office, “Inside the Budget,” April 7, 2003, No 113.

⁹ www.kraybill.home.mindspring.com/46/03richmanplaza.html.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Census, epodunk (marital status), 1.

children (25% of the Bronx population) reside in the Bronx under the age of 15 years old, compared with the national figure of 24%.

According to the U.S. Census, fewer than 50 million of the 72 million children live in two parent households, while 16.5 million of the nation's children are being raised by someone other than a natural parent (i.e., grandparent, extended family member, foster parent, and/or non-relative, etc.).

Although the 2003/2004 statistics for Bronx residents are readily available, they are stark and it is apparent that a large majority of Bronx children are being raised in single parent homes.¹¹ Based on these findings, assimilating a "Single Parent Ministry" into River Park Towers housing complex is vital to creating, structuring, and maintaining a healthy and formative environment for the children as well as the single parents. Notably, the divorce rate of the Bronx residents is lower than the national figures with 7% of the males divorced compared to 10.8% of the national rate.¹²

Reviewing the educational background of Bronx's residents reveal that 26% have attained either a high school diploma and/or General Equivalency Diploma (GED) compared to 29% of the national figure.

Less than 22% have attained some college compared to a national figure of 28%. Less than 9% have received a college degree compared to 9% of the national figure. Interestingly, 68% of the population is enrolled in school grades (1– 12), compared to the national figure of 65% meaning there is a large population of school age children residing in the Bronx.¹³

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristic" (March 2002, Issued June 2003).

¹² U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Census, epodunk (marital status), 1.

¹³ Ibid., (Education), 1.

Data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as part of the Uniform Crime Reporting Program, of the 415,000 working Bronx residents (out of 1.3 million residents), 54% use public transportation, compared to the national figure of 5% using public transportation. Furthermore, a mere 36% of Bronx residents use a vehicle for transportation to work.¹⁴

To add to the plight of Bronx residents, indicated that in the year 2000, these crimes occurred in the borough of the Bronx. This chart reflects the high crime rate of the

Crime	Number
Total	48,070
Murder	112
Rape	271
Robbery	5,419
Aggravated Assault	6,802
Burglary	6,802
Larceny – Theft	23,285
Motor Vehicle Thefts	5,986
Population	1,323,667

Borough of the Bronx.

Additionally, in the year 2000, a total of 141,821 arrests were made in the borough of the Bronx. In lieu of the crime-infested community of Morris Heights, it is vital to have

¹⁴ Ibid., (marital status), 1.

an outreach ministry as provided by Praise Temple A.M.E. church to help address some of the social and spiritual issues.¹⁵ The origin of Praise Temple is rooted in Methodism.

¹⁵ U.S Census Bureau 2000, State and Country, quick facts. NY. Bronx County, <http://quickfacts.Census.gov/qfd/states/36005.html>.1.

Chapter 1

African Methodist Episcopal A.M.E.

The African Methodist Episcopal A.M.E. church dates back to 1787 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, when it was initiated by the late Reverend Richard Allen, and later by the Reverends Absalom Jones, William White and Darius Jinnings, who were members of St. George's Methodist church. In 1816, the A.M.E church was organized formally as a legitimate denomination.¹⁶

Prior to the organization of the A.M.E. denomination in 1816, brethren and sisters, both Black and White worshipped in the same church, St. George's Methodist church. Admittedly, Reverend Richard Allen, the brethren/sisters and founder of the A.M.E church scorned the "unkind treatment of the white brethren" and thus started his own church. As a result, the brethren/sisters refused to abide by the Jim Crow policies implemented to limit their communication with Whites.

Although many Blacks were illiterate ex-slaves and for the most part uneducated, they possessed a sense of dignity and pride which allowed them to worship with other Blacks and to disregard the treatment of the Whites.¹⁷

Richard Allen not only sought spiritual freedom from his White counterpart, but freedom for social and political empowerment as well. Allen and the A.M.E. denomination unified and built an institutional place for African Americans to develop

¹⁶ History of AME Today, www.ame-todayoday/history/index.shtml.

¹⁷ Ibid.

various organizations. Some of the organizations established were: The Benevolence Society, Educational Programs, and The Free African Society, which was a religious benevolence organization that provided fellowship and mutual financial aid for free Africans and their descendants.¹⁸

The legacy of Richard Allen's endeavors in Philadelphia was enormous. In 1795, he opened one of the first day schools in America for African Americans, taking in sixty children the first year. By 1810, Allen and the A.M.E. denomination were operating 10 schools in the city. He also helped found the Society of Free People of Colour, which served to promote education for children of African descent. Ministry for Allen exemplified the holistic approach as he sought the collective well being of African Americans. Ultimately, Allen believed all the mission programs he sponsored were as important as saving souls.¹⁹

After the A.M.E. was founded, additional independent churches were formed in Baltimore, MD; Wilmington, DE; Attenborough, PA; and Salem, NJ. In 1799, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal church (Mother Bethel) was built in Philadelphia. Richard Allen was ordained a minister for the church by Bishop Francis Asbury of the Methodist Episcopal church. In 1816, the Bishop consecrated Reverend Allen as Bishop of the newly organized A.M.E.

Today, the A.M.E. denomination is one of the strongest African American church organizations in the country, with a membership of 1.5 million nationwide in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Africa, as well as in Canada. The denomination has also launched prestigious institutions of higher learning, including Wilberforce University, Allen

¹⁸ Dale T. Irvin, "Richard Allen," (Unpublished Paper, n.d.), 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

University, Paul Quinn College, and Morris Brown College. More importantly, the A.M.E organization has developed a host of able and dedicated black leaders, both clergy and laypersons to shape the history of African-Americans in the United States. The A.M.E. church follows a Methodist doctrine and church government and holds General Conferences annually for its 1.5 million memberships.²⁰ One of the local churches of the A.M.E. organization is Praise Temple A.M.E.

Praise Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1750 Sedgwick Avenue, located in the Bronx, New York, originated as a Church School in the apartment of Civic Leader, Reverend Shirley R. Dowling, and the founding pastor. Reverend Dowling, a first grade school teacher in District 5 Community School Board, CES 230 in the Bronx, recognized that the personal and emotional needs of her first graders were being ignored by the New York City Board of Education.

The school failed to adequately diagnose Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and to provide the pertinent treatment to meet the emotional and physical needs of first graders. Consequently, the Board of Education added additional burden to the teachers. After becoming overburdened, Reverend Dowling prepared a plan that was reviewed and accepted by the first graders' parents.

Reverend Dowling's first course of action was to invite the students and parents into her home for Church School to be held on a Sunday. Surprisingly, sixteen children and their parents attended the first Sunday. During the service, Reverend Dowling taught the gospel message of Jesus Christ. This Church School Ministry immediately affected and touched the spiritual, emotional and social aspects of the first graders' lives.

²⁰ History of A.M.E. Today.

Based on the initial success of the Church School in 1989, Reverend Dowling's mission statement was drafted and approved by the congregation: *Praise Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church is an ecclesia of worshipers, building and investing in the lives of children and their families.* As the Church School grew and the number of children increased rapidly, Reverend Dowling's four month program was granted authorization by the 1750 Sedgwick Avenue Tenants' Association to move her church School to the community room, which came with two bathroom facilities and a fully equipped mini-kitchen. This was a major accomplishment for Reverend Dowling since her seating capacity increased from below 20 to 190 seats.

In 1990, Praise Temple became an organized viable church, under the guidance of Presiding Elder Vernon I. Lowe, of the Brooklyn-Westchester District of the A.M.E church. After numerous meetings, Elder Lowe called a meeting of Praise Temple's elected officers who voted the Church School as an organized church. Later, the congregation unanimously affirmed the vote.

Over the past 16 years, Praise Temple developed the following ministries: Pastoral Counseling, Parenting Seminars, After-school Tutoring, Childcare, Church School, Leadership Seminar, Youth Ministry, and Teaching and Preaching Ministry. These ministries were shepherded by five clergywomen.

Today, Praise Temple is known as the "House Church" and is modeled after the early church of the First Century Christians as follows: *And every day in the Temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah*" (Acts 5:42). Praise Temple, of the Morris Heights community has had a significant impact, and has provided Childcare Services, Parenting Classes, Pastoral Counseling and S.H.A.R.E (a food

distribution program for low-income families). Although the church continues to grow spiritually as well as in number, the greatest challenge of the church is to secure and purchase a building to house the church.

Currently, in addition to the community room, Reverend Dowling has compartmentalized her apartment in the following sections:

The Living Room----Church School

The Dining Room----Leadership Seminar

The Pastor's Daughter's Room----Nursery/Finance Room

The Terrace----Storage

When worship service is held, all the rooms in the apartment had to be reorganized in order to accommodate the entire congregation. Additionally, the apartment is used as a dining facility to feed members of other congregations that may come to worship.

As lay leader at Mariner's Temple Baptist Church, the author (Reverend Rena C. White) became a member of Praise Temple in 1991. She served in the ministry for 16 years and received her Deaconate ordination, May 1995, and her second ordination as Itinerant Elder, May 2002.

Another challenge of ministry at Praise Temple was to children with emotional and behavioral problems. The second challenge was to ride public transportation from China Town to the Bronx several times a week.

The outgrowth of Praise Temple has been phenomenal in providing a forum for spiritual and moral support for single parent mothers: One example is Janet Brown (not her real name), a mother of two who graduated with a B.A. Degree in English and has

become a homeowner. Another example is Susan Johnson (not her real name), the mother of two daughters, who became gainfully employed and has since earned an Associate Degree. A third example is Evangelist Barbara Cooks (not her real name), the mother of four children who became financially independent and is currently working towards obtaining her General Equivalency Diploma. The fourth example is Susan Cox (not her real name), a divorce mother of four, who also became financially independent and no longer receives public assistance as she earned college credits toward her B.A. Degree.

Praise Temple's Single Parent Ministry is also reflective of the success of the young adults:

John Thomas (not his real name), 26-year old male has been a member of Praise Temple since the age of 12, is gainfully employed at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx, and has earned a GED diploma and some college credits. Recently, John was married and he and his wife are pursuing higher education. Today, they continue to worship at Praise Temple church.

Praise Temple has also been instrumental in assisting "at risk" youth who became troublesome at school and problematic at home with their parents. Some of the youth have been academically deprived and left back a grade due to this misbehavior. An example is a 15-year-old female, who moved into the Pastor's home, and later became a model student whose conduct improved tremendously. She became the Vice-President of the Youth Council of the 16th District in the Bronx, and has lectured at City Hall for the forum of Council Woman, and delivered the "Statement of Purpose" for the meeting. Last, and more importantly, she became a candidate for college. The numerous success stories of the church have been made possible through the various ministries of Praise Temple. These

programs are available to members of the River Park Towers' community to become empowered and self-sufficient in their quest to raise their respective families and to lead productive and fruitful lives.

The success of this program served as the backdrop for my own particular project that was developed as a new ministry to single parents. In the fall of 2003, I began working with members of the church to prepare for this effort. A site team was gathered, and we formulated the following challenge statement:

The River Park Towers, a high-rise urban development is located in a poverty-stricken neighborhood in the Bronx, New York and houses a large population of single mothers. Some of these parents lack effective parenting skills to enable them to raise children in a healthy, educational, social and moral environment. The lack of skills serves to contribute to their family breakdown. Praise Temple A.M.E. church heralds a single parent ministry that will serve to equip the River Park Towers' mothers with the necessary skills to assist them to raise their children and to develop their faith in God.

On November 29, 2003, I presented a draft of my Doctorate of Ministry proposal to the Site Team for their review. The Site Team was in support of the project, and they were pleased to be a part of the implementation of the program that will help transform the lives of single parents and the community at large.

In light of the single parent ministry, the site team members contend that the single parent ministry was not to be viewed as a separate entity, but an attempt to bring together resources of the church, government, private industry, and non-profit organizations. In this collaborative effort, the ties of single parents on Welfare could be severed, thereby, enabling these parents to rise to the optimum level of self-sufficiency in a holistic way. Thus, *Praise Temple Outreach Single Parent Ministry* would serve as the catalyst in fostering community revitalization and empowerment for those who are on the lowest

economic level in our society by using an approach, which is spiritually centered, and community based.

The Chairperson of the Site Team, Mr. Elwin Ford concluded by stating the Doctorate of Ministry project, single parent ministry was a much-needed ministry in the church, and beyond the walls of the church, River Park Towers Housing Complex. The Site Team further stated that they felt joy in being part of a church that served as a catalyst for spiritual and social change in the community.

Many of the single parents of the River Park Towers community lack the skills, tools and/or resources to allow them to become empowered in the community, which in many cases did not allow them to change their social conditions. These social conditions are deeply rooted in a capitalist society, where racism, classism, sexism and discrimination are prevalent. As a spiritual and social agent, the Black church has embodied some of the same structures of oppression by not providing a specialized ministry to address the various concerns of single parents, mother and father, preventing them from furthering their goals.

Poor single black mothers have been systematically excluded from obtaining the support of their communities, due to the litany of criticism that has been forthright and relentless as they face the blame for much of the ills affecting today's society. Single mothers as head of household continue to be blamed for: the high rate of crime, the pervasive drug and alcohol problem; and the high rate of pregnancy. Many believe "children learn and choose conduct based on the actions of their parents." Moreover,

society fails to understand that it is actually responsible for the poverty rate, illiteracy, homelessness and poor school performance.²¹

The disparate social conditions that single mothers experience have made them a high risk for mental health problems, culminating in high incidences of depression, both founded and unfounded. Single mothers are also more likely to be unemployed and ill equipped with no skills. These mothers are more susceptible to depression based on the lack of a foundation for a family structure, lack of income, and lack of moral and social support from the community at large.²²

Single parents are also perceived as women who have flouted the conventional moral code of society, and are the clearest target of criticism. Some discussions of the problems of single parent families have attempted to explain their plight. Consequently, the recent rhetoric toward single parent families have been hostile, victim blaming, with a hysterical tone that is reminiscent of other episodes of scapegoating in America's history. As the scapegoats of society, single mothers may be compared to the human scapegoats during the ancient Greek time known as *pharmakos*.²³

In Old Testament, a goat was burdened with the sins of the Jewish people, and sent into the wilderness to rid the nation of its inequities. Today, many know this ritual as Yom Kippur. In (Lev.16: 8-26), Azazel is the name given to the goat, which was taken into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement. The priest made atonement over the scapegoat, laying Israel's guilt upon it and then to send the goat away. The goat bore "upon him all their inequities unto a land not inhabited."²⁴ Likewise, Jesus also makes atonement for the inequities for single parents.

²¹Ruth Sidel, *Keeping Women and Children Last: America's War on the Poor* (New York: Penguin Book, 1998), 42.

²²Ibid., 41-42.

²³ Ibid., 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

Moreover, the goat that was sent into the desert was traditionally known as the scapegoat. The definition that is set forth in the diction is: “A goat upon whose head symbolically placed the sins of the people, after which he was suffered to escape into the wilderness.” The second definition is: “A person or thing that is made to bear blame for others.”²⁵

An example of blaming the victim is found in the written report by Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family*.

At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro Family. It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community...In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society that retards the progress of the group as a whole.²⁶

Pursuing this further, I refute Moynihan’s report of the “*Negro Family*” by using a quote advanced by Francis Beale:

In attempting to analyze the situation of the black family in America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact and defensive attitudes on the part of many. The system of capitalism (and its after birth...racism) under which we all live, has attempted by many devious ways and means to destroy the humanity of all people, and particularly the humanity of the black family. This has meant an outrageous assault on every black family who reside in the United States of America.²⁷

Consequently, to blame the black family for its own social and economic demise and many of the problems of American society is a way of not placing the blame where it needs to be placed--on to society that led to the structure as the core problem. On the other

²⁵ s.v. “scapegoat,” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (New York, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1955).

²⁶ U. S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (March, 1965), by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, www.dol.gov/oasm/programs/history/webis-moynihan.htm.

²⁷ Francis Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/modern/Double-Jeopardy-Black-and-Female.html>.

hand, I agree with Moynihan in one respect and that is the black families have been forced into a “matriarchal structure,” though of no fault of their own.

In this “matriarchal structure” is a high population of single parents. Some single mothers feel that they are scapegoat of social conditions. These reports of single parents seem unjust. Society’s view of justice towards single parents often seems flawed. One may ask, then, what is justice in this society? Justice specifies what is right by code of law. Admittedly, the concept of justice according to the Bible goes beyond the law of every day life. The Bible speaks of “doing justice,” of doing what is right.²⁸

In Jesus’ earthly ministry, we see how He rejected social injustice against women: the woman with the issue of blood, who could not be received in congregation because she was “unclean” (Mark 5:25-34); the woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:36-50); the prostitute (Matt. 21:31), and the adulteress woman (John 8:1-11). Although these women were rejected by society and the religious community, they were brought into the family of God, and their experiences brought other believers to Jesus.

As Jesus rejected social injustice, so has the black church, which has been in the public arena, maintaining a prominence that continues today within the black community. In addition, the church has served as the institutional base for social, political and economic survival. One example was when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus to a white patron in 1955. Further, black church and its leader organized and rallied the masses to boycott the segregated transportation system in the city. Moreover, the black Church continues to serve as the institutional base for social change as reflective of Praise Temple’s Single Parent Outreach Ministry to the single parents of River Park Towers. In addition, these single parents can provide support to

²⁸ s.v. “justice,” *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.

others and can be a valuable resource for activities, sharing of personal growth and new relationship.

In light of the single parents of River Park Towers, I am mindful of the women of Jesus' day, who were rejected by society and the religious community. On the other hand, Jesus accepted them as they were brought into the family of God to be witnesses to His healing power. Thus, the single parents of River Park Towers are also accepted by Jesus and brought into His family to provide support to other mothers. The rejects of society are reflected in the Biblical text I selected for my Doctorate of Ministry project, Genesis 16 (Hagar) and how God visited her in the wilderness.

Chapter 2

The Biblical story of Genesis 16:1 is said to have begun with Abram, Sarai and Hagar. I propose that this story began with God's call to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). This, thereby, made Abram heir to the "promise" of Yahweh, that out of him would come a great nation: "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (v.2). Before Abram could process the first "promise" of Yahweh, another "promise" was made to him.

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you" and to your descendants forever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants can be counted' (Gen.13: 14-16).

Although Abram was made heir of God's "promise," it would be Sarai to bear the child of the promise. Admittedly, ten years passed from the time Yahweh made Abram heir of the promise, while his wife Sarai remained barren. The promise of Yahweh to Abram seemed contradictory. He was to become a blessed man, the founder of a great nation to be prosperous and live a long productive life. In addition to these many blessings, he was to have a son but his wife was barren. Abram needed a resolution to this divine-human dilemma. He had to produce a male heir at some point.

Abram finds himself in a major dilemma that adversely affected his personhood, self-esteem, and manhood as he bore the stigma of having a barren wife. His wife was not only barren, but also viewed as a disgrace, looked upon as being cursed and punished by God. Further, Sarai's social status was threatened to be reduced to the status of a slave if she did not produce a son for her husband. Thus, for Abram to die without a direct male heir would be a tragedy according to the custom of his time.²⁹

The predicament of Abram and Sarai became a socio-economic and theological problem. What would happen to all of Abram's possessions if he died without an heir? How would the promise made to Abram by Yahweh be realized?³⁰ Numerous obstacles threaten the promise, postponing its fulfillment: barrenness or potential loss of the matriarch, also the fact that the patriarch and his wife were too old to bear children. Consequently, Abram attempted to assist God in the process of obtaining an heir because he understood that an inheritance had strong spiritual and national associations that extend far beyond the family estate. He realized the land of Canaan was regarded as an inheritance from the Lord because God had promised the land to him and his descendants, "You shall take possession of the land and settled in it, for I have given you the land to possess" (Num. 33:53).

In spite of God's promise to Abram and Sarai, they were listed among the heirless families. On the other hand, as an heirless family, it was the common practice of that time to adopt a slave who would inherit the master's good.

²⁹ Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 189.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

Abram sought a slave named Eliezer of Damascus to be his heir. In this situation, “God rejected him for his action. Abrams found himself in double jeopardy; rejected by God for his action and the disgrace of a barren wife” (Gen. 15:2-4.)

Sarai apparently recognized the serious dilemma of not being able to produce an heir for Abram and decided to take matters in her own hands. In an heirless household a substitute is offered, a slave girl could become a concubine for the use of her mistress. Hagar is introduced to become a surrogate mother to resolve the divine-human dilemma of Abram and Sarai, a practice that appeared to have been widespread throughout ancient time.³¹

According to the code of Hammurabi (Par. 146), a slave girl could become a concubine because her status did not provide her with equal status to her mistress.³² Hagar was destined to become a surrogate mother. She was presented as both Egyptian maid of Sarai, and a slave within the household of Abram and Sarai.³³

Hagar, an Egyptian woman, is the first single mother mentioned in the Bible. The story of Hagar begins when she was about to become a mother. She fled from the cruelty of her mistress, intending apparently to return to her relatives in Egypt through the desert of Shur. She felt totally helpless. Nothing was left in her: Wearied and worn, with no resolve, no strength, no will to fight, no desire to go on, the only alternative for Hagar was to leave her mistress home.

Hagar’s story is not foreign to us. It is in deed our story (African Americans). We too have found ourselves victimized by the schemes of other people who were not concerned about our well being. We have been in position that does not allow us to do or

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

say much about our circumstances. Admittedly, we have found ourselves in a desert existence. On the other hand, as African American women, we like Hagar can reach our place distinguished by the name of Beerlahroi (the well of the visible God), where the angel of the Lord appears to us, as a reminder that even in the desert, God still remembers us. Reminding us that crisis on our journey does not have to change our journey destination. Hagar decided to go on, and so too must we. In Hagar's obedience to the heavenly visitor, she returned to the tent of Abram where her son Ishmael was born and remained until after the birth of Isaac, the space of fourteen years. Sarai, after this, began to vent her dissatisfaction both on Hagar and her child. "Ishmael's conduct became insulting to Sarai, and she insisted that he and his mother should be dismissed" (Gen. 16:6-14). At the request of Sarai, Abram dismissed Hagar and Ishmael, although he was reluctant to do so.

Afterward, Hagar and Ishmael wandered into the wilderness, where Ishmael was exhausted from his journey. He was faint from thirst and nearly dead from his wilderness experience. Hagar finds herself in a precarious situation, as her role changed from maidservant to (*ishshah*'), a term used for wife because Sarai ruled that she become Abram's wife. "Hagar lifted her voice and wept and the angel of the Lord, as before, appeared unto her, and she was comforted and delivered out of her distress" (Gen. 21:18).

By now, Abram was fourscore and six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael. At this time "God made a covenant between Himself and Abram informing him that He would multiply him exceedingly, thereby, becoming the father of many nations. He would no longer be called Abram but Abraham: for a father of many nations have I made thee" (Gen. 17:15-16). Pursuing this further, the change of Sarai's name came after the promise

of Isaac. “God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations: kings of people shall come from her” (Gen.17: 15-16).

Hagar resisted evil by running away in the first instance, and by weeping aloud in the wilderness in the second. This is what Womanist Theologian, Cheryl Sanders highlights as Hagar’s unparalleled act of “Naming God.” Once God revealed that her child Ishmael (which means, “God hears”) would have numerous offspring, she responded to God with “You are EL-Roi, for she said...have I seen God and remained alive after seeing him.”³⁴ We see God showing the mother that the very things she needed for her family’s survival was within her reach.

As oppressed women/mothers, we too can resist evil by refusing to surrender our power to sexism. Like Hagar, we can reclaim it with a womanist review of the Word of God. Hagar is a mother in the Scripture often cited because we all have been exploited and disenfranchised by the oppressor, but blessed and empowered by God. Her importance in the African American folk tradition is secured by the affirmation that we are Aunt Hagar’s children.³⁵ In affirming that African Americans are Aunt Hagar’s children, we too have experienced reversed roles in our society: slave, mistress, mother, etc.

Interestingly, the role of Hagar changed from maidservant to (‘ishshah’) wife, not only was Hagar a maidservant, a (‘ishshah’) wife, but she entered into forced motherhood

³⁴ Sheron C. Patterson, *New Faith* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 73.

³⁵ Ibid., 73.

at the expense of resolving the socio-economic status of Abram, at the same time to erase the disgrace of his prominent, beautiful, rich barren wife.³⁶

Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* shows how reading Hagar's story exemplifies the issues and problems black women face in "forced motherhood" and "single motherhood" and "surrogate motherhood."

Williams contends that motherhood for Hagar was a coerced experience involving the violation of her body over which she, as a slave, had no control. Where as, Sarai's position in motherhood was a privilege that would grant her status. While Hagar had no choice in the matters of forced motherhood, the laws provided options for wealthy free women like Sarai who were barren.³⁷

In addition, Margaret Wold in *Women of Faith and Spirit* argues that the coerced motherhood of Hagar was the result of Sarai yielding to the pressure of society on being childless. Wold contends that the pressures of society forced Sarai to go beyond the normal desire for motherhood.³⁸ Thus, Hagar became the object of sexual exploitation by her master's household for the utilization of her body for the breeding of a slave child. This position of a female slave was the highest position Hagar could achieve to become a childbearing concubine to her master. Yet, it was the lowest to be used as a professional prostitute.

Further, Katie Cannon states that black women of slavery had the same status as Hagar, status of property: "her master [had] total power and control over her, and she was denied the most elementary social bonds, her children and family." Drugs, prostitution,

³⁶ Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*.

³⁷ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in The Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1993), 16.

³⁸ Margaret Wold, *Women of Faith and Spirit* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Press, 1987), 92.

sexual and verbal abuse today make many women, whether incarcerated or free, feel as if they are still regarded as property.³⁹

Pursuing this further, Mary is another mother in the Bible who offers us insight into the style of powerful motherhood. She was a young Hebrew girl, who understood the limitations placed on her life because of her gender. Nevertheless, the Angel of the Lord came to her with good news and glad tidings. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The scripture goes on to say, “She was disturbed by the message...trouble at the saying and considered what kind of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:28-29). The greeting from the angel was more than Mary could ever hope for. The sexism that clouded Mary’s life, served as blinders on her eyes and a governor of her aspirations.⁴⁰

The plight of Mary and Hagar, two single mothers, describes many African-American Christian women--able, equipped, and empowered to do a great work for God, yet bound by sexism. Consequently, it was crucial that Mary eventually understood that when God plants a ministry, a vision, a plan, or program in your spirit, nothing or no one could deter it. Although Mary could not understand the plan of God for her life, the angel told her, “For with God nothing will be impossible” (Luke 1:37).

Mary went forth to complete a great work for God. Likewise, Afro-American women/mothers, we too can go forward in the work of God—not bound by racism, sexism, and classism. The God of Hagar and Mary reach out to include outsiders, foreigners, women, and their children.

Feminist Theology

³⁹ Katie Cannon, *Womanism: The Soul of the Black Community* (Atlanta: Scholarship Press, 1995), 131.

⁴⁰ Patterson, *New Faith*, 74.

Several feminist theologians have examined the story of Hagar. Some feminists present Hagar as a very strong woman; others viewed her as a weak, submissive slave. The difference of opinion by theologians makes Hagar a subject to study. Feminist theologian, Rosemary Ruther provides some insight for investigation of the patriarchal period where Hagar cycle stories were set. She states “[f]eminist theology is engaged in a critique of the androcentrism and misogyny of patriarchal theology.” This means that in patriarchal theology, the male is taken to be normative and dominant representative of the human species. The male becomes the norm for imaging God for defining anthropology, sin, redemption, and ministry.⁴¹

Therefore, females were viewed as subordinate auxiliary to the male. Hence, women never appear in patriarchal theology as representative of humanity as such. Their normative position is that of absence and silence. When patriarchal theology mentions women, it does so to reinforce its definition of their “place” in its system.⁴²

Although Old Testament reflects a decidedly patriarchal, hierarchal society, it gives mention to exceptional women such as Miriam, the Prophetess and the sister of Moses, who was called a “Prophet because of her ecstatic rousing of devotion to the Lord” (Exod. 15:20). In song and dance, Miriam and companions lead the people in praising God for deliverance. Thus, Miriam became a dominant figure in early tradition.

In addition, there were “chosen” women like Hannah and Rebekah. “But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb” (1 Sam. 1:5). Hannah is the story of a woman who was formerly barren that bore unusual offspring late in life as a special favor from God. The second woman, Rebekah,

⁴¹ Rosemary R. Reuther, “The Future of Feminist Theology in the Academy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 704.

⁴² Ibid.

was the one who gave water from her pitcher to Isaac. “When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, I will draw for your camels also...” (Gen. 24:19-20). The action of Rebekah was the sign for which the servant Isaac had prayed for, and he knew that Rebekah was the young woman whom the Lord God had chosen for him.

Admittedly, exceptional women were mentioned in the patriarchal society, yet the male presence was the dominant figure of the social system. Moreover, it is important to realize the ancient Egyptian society was originally matrilineal. Even during the dynastic times, the female line was of equal account with the male in certain respects. The equal account of women is noted in tracing descent, inheritance, and drawing up of wills. In the equality of women, a disservice was perpetuated against them by disassociating them from their own religious experience.

As reflected in the Biblical matriarchs, women enjoyed ritual practices and spiritual experiences separate from men because of their close association to the “Spirit.”⁴³ Women sought to have their personal religious experiences in the patriarchal milieu while preserving their non-patriarchal social system.

Women enjoyed remarkable legal equality with men throughout much of Egypt’s history. Although there was distinct separation between men and women in public function, it is believed that the official function was relegated to men out of an accepted custom, rather than a conscious desire to keep women out of politics and government.⁴⁴

Moreover, listed among the women matriarchs was Hagar the *shifhah* of Sarah, and the mother of Abraham’s first born. Hagar represented the priestess in the conception and childbirth of Ishmael, but also she was the recipient of a promise that elevated her from

⁴³ Savina J. Teubal, *The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), xxxiv.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

ordinary mother to mother of nations. Other women representative of the matriarchs were: Rachel, Bilah, Leah, and Zilpah.⁴⁵ However, in spite of the matristic or patristic society, equality was established between Abraham and Sarah. Pursuing this further, Delores Williams, searches Scriptures to locate oppressed black women in the tradition of patriarchs.

In understanding the faith of oppressed black women, Williams looks for where the faith of oppressed black women resonates with Scriptures found in a tradition of patriarchs. She states, although oppressed black women have suffered injustices, they suffered with the understanding that God suffered with them. Moreover, He did not will their suffering. These women remained firm in their faithfulness to God. They understood through the death of Jesus, God suffered when they suffered. Though the pain of women was inescapable, yet they witnessed the God who saw them, heard their cries, which bore them up, and shared in their pain.⁴⁶

On the other hand, Williams questioned how oppressed black women experience the work of God as liberation as they remain at the mercy of racial, class, and gender oppressors. Meanwhile, the black (male) Church has identified with Israel in exodus as paradigmatic of their standing in America.⁴⁷ Williams on behalf of oppressed black women identifies with Hagar and Jesus in the wilderness.⁴⁸ Moreover, modern-day Hagar's were chased out of their social world by oppressors---both male and female as it gives reference to Jesus of the temptation narrative. In their survival rather than their deaths, Hagar and Jesus offers ways for God's most invisible and marginal people to survive.

⁴⁵ Ibid., xxxvi.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 199.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Williams project best fits the middle era of Mays' analysis in which God was no longer viewed as liberator.⁴⁹

This has tremendous consequences for Williams' interpretation of Jesus' life and death. Both are significant. In Jesus and Hagar's survival of the wilderness, they offer ways for God's most invisible and marginal people to survive. "Jesus...does not conquer the sin of temptation in the wilderness by resistance."⁵⁰ But only through the ministry of the living, Jesus offers resources for "the oppressed of the oppressed" to survive the "double jeopardy" of their blackness and femininity.⁵¹ "God through Jesus Christ gave [black women] new vision to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life... God helps [the invisible] make a way out of no way."⁵² Williams's soteriology of the wilderness holds up the temptation narrative as the paradigmatic saving event in Jesus' career, and the ethics of the Kingdom of God as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospel as the font of social healing.

This experience naturally produces radical critiques of non-womanist doctrines, including rival doctrine of election and atonement. In Williams' experience, election as nationhood is a poisonous doctrine. She questions how blackness can be a "mysterious identification" between God and God's people, when women of color are being oppressed by their fellow nationals? Besides, Hagar and Ishmael are "internationals"—Hagar an Egyptian expatriate, Ishmael a boy of "mixed race."

Rather, Williams experiences God's favor as taking *familial* form. Hagar and Ishmael helped each other survive in the wilderness. The wilderness redefines even the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁵¹ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female," <http://www.Feministzine.com/feminist/modern/double-Jeopardy-Black-and-female.html> (Accessed February, 2008).

⁵² Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 198.

resurrection. It is not a manifestation of “Jesus’ victory at the cross” (Col. 2:14-15), but a victory of Jesus’ ministerial vision over evil’s attempt to kill it, of which the cross was only one example and an unnecessary one at that.⁵⁴

Williams sees the significance of the cross lies in its purely negative symbolism. It is “the image of human sin in its desecrated form...an image of defilement, a gross manifestation of collective human sin.”⁵³ Williams thinks this must be so because the significance of the cross validates suffering and sacralizes violence. This, thereby supports and intensifies the suffering African-American women have endured for centuries. Further, Williams states that a Cross-centered soteriology not only leave Williams’ people invisible, marginal, and unliberated, but also withhold the resources they need to survive at the hands of patriarchs and racists.

In Williams’ opinion, the category of atonement is one long exercise in underwriting oppression.⁵⁴ There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross, she insists that God does not intend for black women to accept the surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea. Jesus did not come to be to be a surrogate. As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred. To do so is to glorify the sin of defilement.⁵⁵

Williams insists that Jesus came for life to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation that human had very little knowledge of. She states that black women

⁵³ Ibid.,166.

⁵⁴ Ibid.,162-164.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 167.

salvation is assured by Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies He used to help people survive the death of identity.⁵⁶

On these grounds, Williams accuses both the pioneers of black theology and traditional theologians like Martin Luther King Jr. of leading black women passively to accept their own oppression and suffering. Admittedly, King viewed women suffering as:

A most creative and powerful social force...The non-violent say that suffering becomes a powerful social force when you willingly accept that violence on yourself, so that self-suffering stands at the center of the non-violent movement and the individuals involved are able to suffer in a creative manner, feeling that unearned suffering is redemptive, and that suffering may serve to transform the social situation.⁵⁷

In addition, Williams dismisses all of the traditional atonement theories (ransom, satisfaction, victory, and moral influence) as resting on the category of "redemptive suffering." This means the defilement of black women, even if they develop in different ways. Further analysis of Williams's view of redemptive suffering is examined in Black womanist theology.

Black and Womanist Theology in Panoramic Perspective

Granting the force of both of these arguments, one common feature of both, asks for deeper analysis. This is Williams' at first puzzling conviction that Jesus' survival in the wilderness or Jones' claims that Jesus' acceptance of the worst conditions of the human race, offers hope for the world. Since the puzzlement is greater with regard to Williams, we shall begin there.

According to Williams, Jesus' conduct in the wilderness and even in His itinerant ministry seems by themselves to offer less than complete liberation for the world most

⁵⁶ Ibid., 164.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 200.

invisible and marginal people. Jesus is sent to Israel, not to “Hagarenes,” an agenda He sometimes makes insultingly clear--“Go nowhere among the Gentiles...but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt.10: 5-6). His survival in Egypt and his triumph in the wilderness brings him back out of those God-forsaken places and back into Israel, whose lost sheep alone He shepherds. The ethics of the kingdom specify perfect obedience to the Law of Moses, which theocratically marginalizes both women and Gentiles. Jesus leaves scraps of survival for Syro-Phoenician dogs, but nothing like the inheritance He promises His Jewish followers. How then can Williams claim that Jesus’ career offers more than scraps as resources for women in the wilderness?

Williams can do it because oppressed black women are implicitly identifying Jesus and Hagar’s narrative from a panoramic perspective that ends in the full inclusion of both Gentiles and women under God’s eschatological rule. They interpret the wilderness narratives in the context of the whole story.

They follow God’s sustenance of Hagar and Jesus through to their happy conclusion: “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, the angel tells Hagar, for I will make a great nation of him” (Gen. 21:18). Both survival and liberation is reflective of Scripture, “Tell his disciples and Peter that He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as He told you” (Mark 16:7-8). This Biblical assurance is why survival and liberation are deeply embodied in the black Church’s practical faith, as Williams views it.

This broader perspective peeks through only occasionally in Williams’ analysis. For black women who read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-

Hebrew slave, she says, “there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement.”⁵⁸

Then, does Williams consider soteriologies of liberation universally illegitimate, or only ineffective for black women? It’s never completely clear. At times Williams seems to reject other visions of the atonement entirely. At other times she seems merely to deny that the “liberative” strand in black biblical experience applies to women.⁵⁹ Perhaps, since many women in the black church do experience God as a liberator and do not reject faith in the cross, it applies also to those black women whose experiences of God are liberative. The scope of Williams’ critique of rival vision is hard to identify because of her inquiry is purposefully limited to the experience of oppressed black women, and she has narrowed this definition specifically to exclude experiences of liberation.

While she admits that the Bible supports a soteriology of liberation, she finds it not ultimately important to her people. Her method is not about describing themes in the biblical narrative, but about allowing “poor, oppressed black women and men to hear and see the doing of the Good News in a way that is meaningful to them”.⁶⁰ Her circle seems completely closed: Liberation can only be meaningful to those who have experienced it. To have experienced liberation is no longer to be oppressed. No longer to be oppressed is no longer to be among the population with whom Williams is concerned.

Of course, what poor, oppressed blacks hear and see is theory-laden. Its meaning depends on its context, and its context is the whole economy of salvation as the black church has appreciated it—the panoramic biblical frame in which black faith has

⁵⁸ Ibid., 146.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2-6.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 199.

historically found its stories of survival.⁶¹ Williams' vision does facilitate survival—but only by promising more.

This is equally, though less dramatic of Jones' account of how black America appropriates God's promises of liberation. During Jesus' career, there is every indication of his solidarity with oppressed Israel as its divinely accepted representative, but little indication of his solidarity with Gentile sufferers, even those whose suffering resembles Israel's.

The conviction that Jesus had assumed and redeemed the suffering humanity and that Jesus' blackness resembles the blackness of the nations comes only after the Gentiles. The promises had been reluctantly addressed to them (Acts 10: 45-46). Only on the basis of their faith can Jones ultimately claim that Jesus did not “restrict partnership (with humanity) to an elected people,” rather, God Lord himself and freely accepted the worst conditions of the human race, bar none.⁶²

Jones and Williams show us two sides of a black church that appreciate the moment of Christ's career with different degrees of intensity, yet still depends on the whole Biblical story for those moments' significance. Here its tradition does not depart from classical or contemporary Christian practice, as many non-black theologians allege, but resembles its fellow Christian tradition and particularly (according to James Wm. McClendon, Jr.) the “Baptist” tradition in which much of the black church subsists.⁶³ We

⁶¹ This frame is consistently biblical, whether as a pre-critical “biblicism” that dominates in the pews, or a “canonical criticism” more at home in the post-liberal academy. See, for instance, James Sanders' distinctions in *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 65.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 99.

⁶³ James William McClendon, Jr., *Ethics*, vol. 1, in *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 51-35.

have all long engaged in Williams' hermeneutic of "identification-discernment," whether or not we have admitted it.

Yet once this feature of Jones' and Williams' vision is omitted, a Pandora's Box is thrown open. If they both depend upon a common Biblical frame for their internal coherence, it seems that common Biblical frame might support more than one vision. But then each vision's exclusivity is undermined. If the Gospel is liberating to all, then how can Williams be right? If not, how can Jones? That is our next question to answer as we examine Williams and Jones' different perspective of soteriology--Keeping Perspective in Perspective

Jones and Williams claims two different perspectives of soteriology. Jones' claim of God is a radical orthodoxy and states when the black messiah enters into solidarity with the oppressed, assuming and redeeming suffering humanity, then soteriology occurs. On the other hand, Williams' arrives at a radical but different conclusion. She engages in what she calls a hermeneutic of identification-discernment in which believers read the Biblical stories to discern where they belong in its narratives, and where and how God will meet them in their predicament. Williams looks for where the faith of oppressed black women resonates with Scripture and tradition, for only in tradition and Scripture is authority allowed. Thus, soteriology is found in the wilderness and ministerial vision of Jesus.⁶⁴

Both Jones' and Williams' views of soteriology coexist along side other Christian loyalties (black and otherwise). However, particular biblical narratives-vision of atonement toward tradition of soteriological has become less honorable toward

⁶⁴ Ibid., 167.

soteriological exclusivism. The black church has not been spared this failing, which ultimately undermines both Jones' and Williams's vision of salvation.⁶⁵

Berkhof has set forth yet another view of soteriological. He states that the solution is not to adopt a supposedly "catholic" synthesis of atonement theories, exchanging the black church's theological distinctiveness for a homogenized, even majoritarian "ecumenism." Nor is it for black America to follow the program of democratic liberalism to integrate with its neighbors.

Like free churches and other beleaguered minorities, the black church is right to worry that this false universalism would be a further theological invasion by the ones who marginalized it in the first place. Besides, black and womanist theology's commitments to the privileged, even critically unassailable status of their own people's experiences make either proposal a tough sell, especially coming from a white, male, American, Republican theologian! Barhops views are succinctly expressed in the following:

This is mainly a white theological tradition illustrated of soteriology. A century ago, the doctrine of penal-substitutionary atonement, one of five "fundamentals" essential to authentic Christian faith. This soteriology was often developed exclusivistically in evangelical theology. Today, however, internal as well as external forces increasingly push Evangelicals into affirming soteriologies of moral influence, victory and deification. These usually take places alongside substitutionary atonement, often qualifying and informing it, and sometimes critiquing it. We have learned to see them not as deformed branches or our vine that need to be removed to preserve our health, or alien branches that must be grafted in to save us from our weakness, but as growth that we have been too quick to prune. In light of Berhops views of soteriology, he made it quite clear that his views were from a white theological tradition. Therefore, his views of soteriology were not inclusive of other traditions.⁶⁶

A more compelling reason for soteriological inclusiveness in the Biblical frame in which church traditions implicitly read their texts is in order to support their particular

⁶⁵ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁶ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1941), 373-391.

visions of salvation. As we have already shown, is not merely a “white” hermeneutical strategy, but is built into the practical faith of the black church. Williams brings the latter and broader perspective of Galatians and Ephesians to her reading of Hagar narratives. She locates families’ wilderness experiences in a greater narrative that looks beyond wilderness to another time.⁶⁷ Major Jones appeals to the entire scope of God’s economy of salvation in answering the fundamental question of whether God is a white racist.⁶⁸

Similar dynamics characterize black and womanist theology. If pursued and followed, the internal logics and panoramic narrative contexts of the black and womanist theological traditions provide further divine gifts of what Williams calls “*new vision*” to survival and quality-of-life resources where we have seen none before.⁶⁹ Then deepen and widen the liberation that Jones’ brings those who suffer. They do this by pointing to a fuller appreciation of black faith that is more than survival and more than liberation. They keep the black church alive and flourishing and unceasingly restless until it receives what was promised (Heb. 11:39). Furthermore, these gifts ultimately undercut both Jones’ blanket denial of the redemptive quality of suffering and Williams’ denial of soteriological value of the cross. Why? Because, in their different ways, both black and womanist tradition locate black men and women’s salvation with respect to Israel.

In Christ, the nations have histories that are both already theirs, and fundamentally new. The Bible’s Primordial and patriarchal narratives announce that the creation of the nations, including both Israel and black America’s ancestors, is protologically significant: They are part of the plan. The Bible’s prophet and apocalyptic narrative announce that

⁶⁷ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 160.

⁶⁸ William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 115-117.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 203.

God's inclusion of the same nations in the faith of Israel is eschatologically significant: It is through Jacob that all will be blessed.

Thus, along with the first-century Jewish and Gentile church, black Americans experienced the Hebrews' call; enslavement, liberation, wandering, conquest, apostasy, exile, return, and apocalyptic future as in some sense their own.⁷⁰

They appropriated and remembered signs and wonders past, and learned a confident expectation of signs and wonders to come. Rather than splintering divine liberation into an exodus and conquest for every nation, the black church is emancipated through the exodus that Jesus accomplished at Jerusalem Luke 9:31. The survival and liberation of the African-American nation, like that of all the nations, is unearned but long promised share in the survival and liberation of the nation of Israel.⁷¹

Black and womanist theologians rightly reclaim and emphasize chapters of the Christian story that many comfortably lukewarm Christians have chosen not to hear. But the scope of Israel's story must eventually point black theology beyond securing liberation for the oppressed, and must point womanist theology beyond gaining resources for survival in the wilderness, because Israel's canonical story only began in its opening chapters of exodus' wandering.⁷² In light of the Israel story there is yet another perspective by Jones:

⁷⁰ Jones and Williams sometimes imply and others allege that African-American Christianity is incompatible with Pauline Soteriology. But the black soteriology of incorporation into Israel matches Paul's hermeneutical strategy for the Corinthians. Because the nations are adopted into Israel when they are adopted into Christ, Paul can tell the largely Gentile, uncircumcised, Corinthian believers that "our ancestors were under the cloud passed through the sea" (1Cor.10: 1). This resemblance should give black theology pause before they disown other Pauline tropes.

⁷¹ God's act of inclusion thus blesses all people, whether they are narrated by powerful and sinful discourses, de-narrated and atomized by modernity, or re-narrated by postmodern acts of their own fragmented and misdirected wills.

⁷² Though for Williams wandering is first Hagar's wandering, in appropriating the Israelites and temptation narratives, her tradition identifies also with Israel's forty years of wilderness wandering and Jesus' recapitulation of them.

Jones' vision of the Israel story is that we understand the story: that the meek, poor and the oppressed are happy (makarioi, Matt 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-23) because they are oppressed by virtue of the Christlikeness. For they belong to a body liberated in Christ's death and resurrection brought together for its own edification in the Spirit, as a new creation in the midst of the old. God's abundance is for them in a community overflowing with spiritual gifts. Williams present yet another vision of the story: that Hagar's is to be viewed respectfully and that her story ended happily because of her relationship to Abraham and not merely in spite of it. As for as (Ishmael), the son of the slave woman, 'I will make a great nation of him, also because he is your offspring' (Gen 21:13). This connection is not made clear to Hagar, but it is clear to the reader's: All the families of the earth, even the "non-elect, are beneficiaries of God's choices. This is so fully true that through faith, biological Hagarenes can become children of the promise, while through law, biological Israelites can become children of slavery. (Gal.4: 21-31).⁷³

Beyond Survival and Liberation

The biblical frame of both black and womanist claims brings us back to theodicy and deliverance where we find different situations of God's needy people require and receive different resources. In the wilderness, evil's most pressing problem was the threat it poses to survival itself, and God's provisions is *sustenance*—water for Hagar and Moses' people, food from Ishmael's bow and from heaven. In slavery, the question is whether God is fundamentally against Hagar or the Hebrews. God's answer is the promise and fulfillment of life together in freedom for Bedouin Ishmaelites and emancipated Israelites respectively. Space was needed to grow a nation away from Abraham and Sarah's oppression. In the latter case, it comes through the liberating blood of paschal lambs, which point back to the lamb "God would provide to spare Jacob's life" Gen. 22:8 and forward to a lamb slain to ransom saints from every nation" (Rev.5: 9).

⁷³ Williams, use of source criticism to artificially separate this "Elohistic" passage from the Yahwist passage in chapter 16 (31), and even to imply that the god of Abraham and the god of Hagar may be different gods (22-29), is surely not how African American women typically read Hagar's story!

Then, in freedom, theodicy gains new occasions in the evil perpetuated among God's people. Soon after Abraham's promise is fulfilled, "Ishmael mocks Isaac, laughing at the second-born son" (Gen. 21:9, Gen 21:6). This calls down the wrath of the defensive mother through whose folly he was named (Gen. 18:12-15). Soon after the exodus, the sins of newly freed Israel accumulate: Oppression of fellow Hebrews, oppression of new Canaanite neighbors, "not all of which was divinely sanctioned" (Deut. 16:12).

For Ishmael and his mother, deliverance comes as fellowship in Egypt Gen. 21:21. For Ishmael, it comes as a Law to preserve the nation's holiness and a sacrificial system that cleanses it after the Law is violated. To be a liberated people is to be under a new, just master (Rom. 6-7). After the gospel of exodus comes the law of Sinai. The survival strategy for wilderness wanderings includes the legal and priestly resources that continue to regulate the new life in and out of the Promised Land. When the new master's law is broken and the cycle of violence is unleashed inside the camp, the law demands reconciliation. This takes the form of sacrifice—even the sacrifice of innocent blood in exchange for the lives of the guilty. The tabernacle and temple are systems for the liberation needed after liberation. They maintain God's identification with the oppressed after they themselves engage in oppression. They are resources of reconciliation. They point forward to the cross, which now liberates not as Israel's paschal lambs liberated the innocent.

This is the world and the Israel into which Jesus was born, suffers, and rises again. Israel's history in and out of its promised land, before Jesus' ministry and in its wake, proves that survival and liberation ultimately depend on reconciliation as much as reconciliation depends on them. How then do law, sin, and priesthood work among the

liberated black people of God? Here black theology grows quiet. Cone and Wilmore's two-volume *Black Theology: A Documentary History* pays remarkably little attention to life *after exodus*. It offers much liberation, but precious little law.⁷⁴ In concentrating on the event of justification, it marginalizes the processes of sanctification.⁷⁵ Joseph Johnson in 'Jesus the liberator' claims the following:

For instance, Joseph A. Johnson, Jr. claims that Jesus' ministry liberates those on the fringe of society: the sick, the possessed, the gentiles, and even the guilty, "the prostitutes, the thieves, the murderers, the robbers, Johnson passes over the most problematic group of all—the tax collectors—but his point remains, that Jesus is the liberator of all. Yet how can liberation happen after God's people have themselves engaged in further oppression? Johnson says that Jesus 'makes himself accessible to those who need him.' But from where comes his accessibility to the guilty? (And what about those not on society's fringes?) It seems as those Williams can accept Johnson's view that Jesus is the liberator of all. However, she questions God's liberation of those that are still oppressed. I feel her answer was stated earlier, that God through Jesus Christ offers *new vision* to see the resources for positive, abundant relational life for those that are liberated and yet oppressed. I agree with Williams view in this context.⁷⁶

This theological and practical vacuum has understandable historical reasons, in black theology's reaction to a history of whites characterizing themselves as "noble, manly, wise, strong, and courageous" and characterizing blacks as "patient, long-suffering, humble, self-effacing, considerate, submissive, childlike, [and] and meek."⁷⁷ Arranged in this way, both white and black "virtues" have excused and even glorified systematic

⁷⁴ Perhaps this comes from black theology's birth as a reaction to the integrationism of Martin Luther King Jr., which is deeply interested in the ethical shape of life after liberation.

⁷⁵ Evans characterizes Cone's central concern as justification of the oppressed before God and the grounding of true humanity in the freely given acceptance of the oppressed by God—"autonomy," and Roberts' as sanctification of the oppressed in their relationships with God and the human family—"community." These are two functions of empowerment (112). Evans himself proceeds to concentrate on liberation.

⁷⁶ James Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One: 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 203-213.

⁷⁷ Kyle Haselden, *The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 42-43.

oppression. In reclaiming the former virtues, black theology should not abandon the latter ones. They are no less crucial to forgiveness and reconciliation.⁷⁸

What the black church can offer is what the black church already has: a robust soteriology of solidarity, survival, liberation, and reconciliation. The first Christians found many metaphors for the cross, which reflect many dimensions of salvation.⁷⁹ Each echoes earlier chapters in the world's history of salvation, and depends on other dimensions for its health. The black church has different visionaries, and at different ages appreciated all of them.

One, a means of identification, takes up the imagery of God's presence in the tabernacle (John, 1:14-18) envisioning the cross as the incarnate God's universal communion with sinning and sinned-against humanity. This is the basis of Robert's two-fold soteriology of liberation and reconciliation.⁸⁰ Another means of survival and healing, takes on two Johannine images. The first is the serpent Moses lifts up in the wilderness for healing, John 3:14, a type that foreshadows the cross, conferring healing and life onto the world John 3:15-17. The second is the manna in the wilderness, a type that proclaims Jesus crucified, flesh and blood, as bread from heaven (John 6:31), that again gives life to the world, (John 6:32).

The wilderness context for these images makes them obvious points of contact, between the cross and womanist soteriology. They are given precisely to those who are born into slavery, homeless, landless, surrounded by enemies, and utterly dependent upon God for the next day's subsistence—the “people who are no people.” Still another, means

⁷⁸ Gregory L. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans), 1995.

⁷⁹ James Wm. McClendon, Jr. describes the “atonement theories” of Christian soteriology as Wittgensteinian “metaphor” in *Systematic Theology Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 199-213

⁸⁰ Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology*, 121-122.

of victory, takes on the imagery of Passover, (1 Cor. 5), envisioning the cross as freeing captive Israel and recreating a people holy to God. This is the image with which black theology consistently resonates (for instance, in the work of James H. Cone).⁸¹

A fourth, a means of sacrifice, takes up the imagery of sin offerings and Temple, envisioning the cross as freeing sinners through the shedding of innocent blood.⁸² As we have seen, Jones s rejects this vision and claims the cross would free whites by the blood of blacks. Williams rejects it as endorsing a surrogacy that would interpret black women's suffering as redemptive and sacred. To answer Jones, the Temple was not an institution for atoning for Jewish sins through the blood of animals. While Romans punished Jesus-in part for being Jewish, God did not. Rather, Jesus took on the sins of His people as a living sacrifice, at Jordan and Golgotha, and God accepted the sacrifices, liberating and exalting His chosen Son, (Luke 9:35) and the chosen people He represented. Likewise, to answer Williams, while Sarah punished Hagar, in part for being Egyptian, God did not. Rather, God had mercy on her and heard her son's cry, turning exile into opportunity, out of fidelity to the promise made to Abraham.

Admittedly, Jesus was a sacrifice for the good of others, so was Hagar a sacrifice for an heirless couple, Abram and Sarai. We also see in the lives of African slaves who sacrificed free labor for their White slave masters. However, God raised Jesus up from the grave, He turned Hagar's exile into opportunity, and He delivered the slaves from slavery. Although Hagar in Biblical terms represents the Jewish church, which symbolized bondage, God liberated her and she became the recipient of a promise that elevated her

⁸¹ Ibid., 68-69.

⁸² Ibid., 173. It perhaps is this sense that Cone can affirm in citing "ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) as evidence that God's freedom for the poor is more than the liberation of slaves from bondage.

from ordinary mother to mother of nations. The significant of Hagar's liberation is reflective of other single parents.

Today, single ministries have adopted the name Hagar to symbolize Hagar's triumphs. In the state of Pennsylvania, the Calvary church has a single mother's ministry called *Hagar's Ministry*. "The name Hagar was chosen as a reminder of the Old Testament woman who, as a single mother, was cared for by God in a desperate time of need."⁸³

According to Nancy R. Heisey, Hagar is so easy to miss in the Biblical story as she represents ordinary women who have often been ignored, sometimes scorned and rejected, yet, she is a shining witness to God's true nature. "The God of Hagar is one who reaches out to include outsiders, foreigners, and the no-accounts of the world. As with the stories of many Biblical women and churchwomen throughout the centuries, God reached out to them. In Hagar we get a glimpse of some of the gifts that women have to offer to the church and the world." Further, Professor Heisey states that women bring six gifts to the church and the world at large.

Professor Heisey list these gifts as follows:

- *The gift of understanding and suffering*
- *The gift of love and care*
- *The gift of a rich witness to Jesus Christ*
- *The gift of claiming God's liberation*
- *The gift of filling in the gaps*
- *The gift of demonstrating community*

The gift of understanding and suffering is not a new phenomenon that women offer to the church. Throughout history, women have borne the greater burden of suffering with

⁸³ Nancy R. Heisey, "Six Gifts Women Bring to the Church" Mennonite World Conference 17, no. 2 (2002), 11.

the understanding that God suffered with them, although He did not will their suffering. As we reflect on the Patriarchal societies around the globe, we see women have been physically and emotionally abused. They were raped, deprived of their children, tortured and killed for protesting injustices and for standing firm in their faithfulness to God. Further, women sacrificed sleep, food and even their lives to preserve the lives of their families.

Sometimes these women suffered in silence, meekly accepting it as their lot. Yet, at the same time, testifying of their experiences that God was with them. These women understood through the death of Jesus, God suffered when they suffered. Moreover, the pain of the women could not be escaped, yet these women witnessed the God who saw them heard their cries, bore them up and shared in their pain.

Gift of Love and Care in all societies, women have been the givers of love and care. Martha Nussbaum, an American philosopher, points out these two capabilities, love and care as defined by both ancient and modern philosophers as central to the common good of humanity.⁸⁴

The gift of love and care is viewed at the birth of infants as mothers so tenderly nurse them. In the gift of love and care, women offer the bulk of the care to their children. Women were also known for cultivating their harvest and preparing most of the food for their extended families, as well as caring for the sick, their elderly parents, husbands, and siblings. In the Book of Acts, (9:36-42), we glimpse a snapshot of the disciple Dorcas who made tunics for poor widows and their children. Further, in the third century after Christ, a terrible plague afflicted the city of Alexandria in Egypt, and Christians left their homes to care for the sick and the dying. Others included in the care of the sick and dying were the

⁸⁴ Ibid., 12.

Priests, deacons, laypersons who joined in to care for the plague victims as well. Therefore, the gift of love and care is very vital to ministry.

The gift of rich witness to Jesus Christ: Christian women not only used their gift of love and care to reach out actively beyond the Christian community but to witness Jesus Christ. From the beginning of the church, faithful women were the first witnesses at Jesus' empty tomb. Women have continued to proclaim Christ's love. Although Women have often lacked formal empowerment to preach and/or evangelize, they took the advantage of daily contacts with friends, neighbors as well as strangers to share the Good News. Witnessing the gift of Jesus Christ often superseded conditions and/or personal illnesses. One such person was a Dutch Anabaptist woman name Elizabeth who was arrested in 1549 for being a "Teacheress." Another example was a Mennonite woman who suffered from a bone disease and was quoted as saying: "I am an Evangelist for God, I like to spread the gospel and show others Jesus' goodness, even though I can't walk much to visit people."⁸⁵ We see that ministry is not always limited to pleasant conditions.

The gift of claiming God's liberation is another gift that women offer to the church. This gift claims liberation as God's will for them and for all people. We see in the ministry of Jesus when confronted by two women who took the initiative to ask Him for what they needed: "[t]he woman with the hemorrhage who over stepped the boundaries of her culture's purity regulation to receive the benefits of Jesus' healing power" (Mark 5:24-34); and the demand of the " Syro-Phoenician woman to include her daughter in His healing community, pushing Him to stretch the boundaries of His ministry beyond His own people" (Mark 7:24:30).

⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

Women throughout centuries have recognized that the gospel is for them, and that the Good News meant that they were free to use all the gifts God had given them. Indeed, the acknowledgement of freedom in Christ may be the most miraculous of all the gifts women had to offer the church. They have persisted in their claims of full personhood despite continuing barriers of Biblical interpretation and church order used to limit them. Christian women all over the world have continued to pursue leadership roles in the church, in spite of much opposition against them. They have knocked on doors of the church to gain entrance to leadership position and bravely walked through the doors when opportunity was presented. Today, women continue to pursue leadership position in the church.

The gift of filling in the gaps: Women have exercised leadership in a way that reflects the gift of filling in the gaps. The way in which filling in the gaps is determined is by assessing a need. Some of the needs met by women were: bringing flowers to decorate the meeting places, teaching the children in Sunday school, attend services regularly, prepare food for services and contribute most faithfully in church offering.

The gift of filling in the gap has been demonstrated in my church, Praise Temple A.M.E. church for many years. As a small church with few members, there were many gaps to fill: the gap of cooking, cleaning, teaching, preaching, working in the nursery, organizing chairs, disassembling chairs, going to the homes of children to bring them to church and to returning them home after church.

Filling in the gap is a gift we continue to use at Morris Brown A.M.E. church in Queens New York, our second charge. The membership of this church consisted mainly of the elderly and once again there were gaps to be filled. We filled the gaps of vacuuming,

sweeping, cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the bathrooms, driving the parishioners to the subway, stocking food in the pantry and to pack bags for the elderly. In addition, one of the other tasks we performed was painting the property of the church. One of the additional tasks we performed was to paint the fence around the property. Although it appeared at times that our many endeavors of the church were unrecognized. As faithful members of the church, we continued to hold up before God its needs and those of the community because we realize that filling in the gap is our gift unto the Lord, who will reward us.

The gift of demonstrating community is a gift women offer to the church and the world as it demonstrates the power of the community to carry out the work of the church. This gift of community can also offer the church a model for working together and getting things done, based on cooperation and mutual respect. The gift of community is reflected in the Gospel of (Luke 8:2-3), when Jesus called several women together to travel with Him, who provided for Him from their resources.

Working together continues to be women's way. One example is from the mother's in Argentina, where women gathered in the plaza weekly in silence to protest against an oppressive regime. We also see community demonstrated in women's group from Dhaka to Denver, who sold ten thousand village products to enhance the income of their families.⁸⁶ Moreover, the gift of demonstrating community is not exclusive to women. According to the gospel of (Luke 8:1), Jesus called a group of men to be His disciples. Therefore, the gifts of community are to be shared together, to be learned and practiced by all members of the believing community. It is within community that Christians are called. As we view the Biblical text, it is the community in which Hagar is viewed.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 15.

Selecting the Biblical Text

The Biblical text I selected is Genesis 16. My reason for considering this text is my interest in Hagar, who was a single parent. This topic is also relevant to my D. Min project, "Single Parents in the church." Therefore, I bring to this text my concerns of the social treatment of single parents in the church and/or in the community. In many instances, single parents are blamed for their own problems and many of the problems of American society, rather than the social and economic conditions that led to the structure as the core problem.

As the facilitator of the Parenting Class in my church, I heard the concerns of these women and how they were viewed and treated by society. As I reflect on the Biblical character Hagar, I am reminded of my own experience as a divorced single parent of limited resources: education; lack of job training; and the economic empowerment to lift my family from a life of depravation. Some of the ills I encounter were social and economic. Moreover, I was a victim of sexism and classism. Having experienced inferior treatment as a single parent, I come with a sense of urgency to encourage other single parents to achieve upward mobility: economically, socially, educationally and spiritually.

In encountering the Biblical text of Hagar, I felt a sense of anger in her treatment as a servant/slave to be exploited and used as property by her owners. In engaging the text, I am reminded of my African ancestry of slavery when women were sold into slavery and used for sexual exploitation by their slave masters. Women were without power or control over their lives, as it was with Hagar in ancient history.

The lens in which I viewed the text was of the twenty-first century, as opposed to ancient Biblical times. In light of reading the text of Hagar, I have come to realize that

during Hagar's time, it was the custom of that era to use the maidservant to bear a child or children for a barren woman or women. Therefore, my prior experience of the text, Genesis 16, was viewed out of context

My past experience with the text has been the selfishness of an old barren couple that exploited their maidservant for their personal gains, without any thoughts or concern of Hagar's feelings in the matter. In my understanding of the text, I realized the scriptures must be located in its original context. Clearly, the process of translating scriptures is in its given context of ancient time, its languages, Hebrew or Greek. I realized that the text was encountered with all of its assumption, values, and when translations are examined, each one should reflect its own context.

In addition, other translations of Scriptures are needed for clarity for readers. The various translations of the text reveal different meanings. In my opinion, the most reliable translation of the Bible is the New Revised Standard Version. This Bible not only records the canonical books of the Bible but the non-canonical books as well, thus, providing the readers of Scriptures with other resources in which to interpret the Bible in its entirety.

In the process of translating the text, one must identify the shape of the text. In this context, Genesis 16 is in the form of a narrative and the situation is the barrenness of Sarai. The characters encountered in this text are the narrator of the text, Abram, Sarai Hagar, Ishmael and the angel. What concerns me about the text is the triple repetition revealed in the following verses 9-11, "The angel of the Lord said to her...", "The angel of the Lord also said to her...", "And the angel of the Lord said to her..." The reference of this passage states that the translation is misleading as it suggests a theological judgment that was foreign to the thought of early Israel. Further, within the tradition of Israel there was no

distinction between “the angel of the Lord” and Yahweh, nor intermediary beings who would intrude in the affairs and activities of humans. In this source, “the angel of the Lord” is identified with Yahweh in verse 13.

In this situation, retelling of the legend in the E source, we find a contrast. Here God hears the child of Hagar weeping, and the “the angel of God” speaks to Hagar from heaven, (Gen. 16:17), but verse 18b makes it clear that in the mind of the narrator, it is God who speaks to Hagar.⁸⁷

In view of Genesis 16, and the barrenness of Sarah, I like to reference a similar text found in the New Testament scripture Luke Ch.1, which is the story of Elizabeth who was barren like Sarai. Abram and Sarai, Zacharias and Elizabeth, were two couples in the same situation, wives that were barren. The differences between these two couples however were that Zacharias and Elizabeth accepted their barren situation and waited on the promise of God in their old age. They believed whole heartily in God’s promise to them, “For with God nothing shall be impossible” (Luke 1:37), unlike Abram and Sarai who became wearied in waiting on God’s promise. They attempted to assist God by using their slave girl Hagar to have the child God promised them.

In lieu of Genesis 16, one must view it contextually. The literary context of this text is historical as it introduces the first great patriarch of ancient Israel (Abraham) and the covenant between him and God. Genesis 16 is a passage found in cycles of stories and is a narrative of extended discussion. The impact on readers in reading Genesis 16 is realizing it is not a separate story but one of a larger story. In the exclusion of this text, a part of the text would be missing and the book of Genesis would be incomplete.

⁸⁷ Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Tradition* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), 54-58.

The social context of Genesis chapter 16 is of great wealth as it stemmed from Abram's ownership of livestock and land. In addition, there were servants in the household. Abram's family was viewed by the inhabitants of the land as influential, yet one of the greatest riches was lacking in their lives was the ability to have a child. Upon engaging the text, I discovered how the text differed from my initial response of the principal issues found within. Thus, what I considered to be immoral in the text was actually the customs and values of the ancient world. God's message to me in this text is to understand the Scriptures in its proper context. Scriptures taken out of context limits readers to a false sense of God's truth.

Moreover, the way this text can engage others is reflective of the way God blessed Abram and Sarai in spite of their disobedience to wait for the promised child Isaac. We see in this text the sovereignty of God toward His people. The Biblical text was formatted from Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe's *Biblical Interpretation*.⁸⁸ We continue to see the sovereign plan of God in the theological reference of the present project.

⁸⁸ Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretation: A Road Map* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996).

Chapter 3

The Bible declares “God is working out His/Her sovereign plan of redemption for the world through His/Her sovereign control over the affairs of nature and history” (Isaiah 45:19, Rom. 8:18). My claim reflects the sovereignty of God and the redemptive power in the social conditions of single parents and humanity. Furthermore, the Scripture declares that God has revealed Him/Her self in creation. “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things He has made” (Rom.1: 20). This Scripture is a clear indication of God’s existence.

God’s divine power and nature are reflective of my African ancestors who were enslaved. They were a people whose lives were wrought in great suffering of physical and mental abuse, and of murder. For my ancestors, God became the life-giving power that enabled them to survive in the midst of misery and to endure until freedom came. The slave’s life-giving power also became their liberator who empowered them to fight against their oppressors.

Evans stated that the slaves’ idea of God was one who opposed slavery. Thus, one may conclude that the slaves believed God, being a just God, would then punish the slaveholders for their misdeeds. God being a just God would also identify with the slaves, His creatures, created in the image of God.⁸⁹ This statement of Evans reflects this

⁸⁹ James Evans H. Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 59.

Scripture. “So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God, He created them,” (Gen. 1:27 and 28) and God blessed them

As an African American woman, I continue to struggle for freedom, liberation and justice in an unjust society. Furthermore, as God was the life giving power to my ancestors to survive and to fight for freedom, likewise He/She will for me.

I believe God is the God of the poor, of the oppressed and is in solidarity with the victimized and marginalized. Further, God loves the oppressors as well as the oppressed and has entered into history to set humankind free. God has identified Him/Herself with the poor through Jesus Christ as recorded in Matt 25:35-40, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink... [A]nd the king will answer them, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” “Jesus identifies with the poor to the extent that He instructs the poor to be invited to the feast” (Luke 14:13). This Scripture reflects God’s concern for the poor, both spiritually as well as economically.

As Christians, we are called into solidarity with the poor and the community at large. In the lives of the Hebrews, “God not only existed but one who acted in human affairs” (Exod.3). God continues to reveal God self through God’s people, to be His/Her mouthpiece, hands, a voice to stand to cry loud against injustice anywhere and everywhere in the world. Jesus is our example to follow. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14 9). Jesus pitched his tent in the midst of us at the center of history. The understanding of Jesus, His life, His ministry and His mission is through scriptures, and by His interaction with people during His time on earth. As we come to know Christ,

we learn of His work, teaching and His sacrifices, most of all about Him as Servant, Prophet, Savior and Redeemer.

Although Jesus faced the alienation of His day, He rejected both subservience and superfluosity. In setting His face toward Jerusalem, He resolved to do battle with the dominant forces of the society, both secular and religious. The dominant forces were responsible for casting so many of its people into identities and structure alienation.⁹⁰ Further, He neither denied the pain of the alienation that He experienced, “My God, My God, why has thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46), nor did He blame the victims of society, “Woman, where are your accusers? Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more” (John 8:11). As Jesus rejected the Zealots to overthrow Rome, He was moved beyond sheer activism to accomplish His goal.

Jesus in defining His mission stated, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). It is here that we see Jesus the preacher whose primary objective was to reach the poor. Jesus as healer was the great physician who cared for and identified with the oppressed, depressed and those who were the outcasts of society. Ultimately, we see Jesus as the Blessed Redeemer, Liberator, Brother, Friend and Lord. Jesus as we understand in Scriptures is both the Son of God and Son of Man. As Son of God, Jesus Christ is declared Emmanuel “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

⁹⁰ Richard T. Snyder, *Once We Were No People: The Church and Transformation of Society* (Bloomington, Indiana: Meyerstone Books, 1998), 65.

Jesus was and is the “very God, begotten of the Father before the entire world, light of light by which all things were made, who came down from heaven to save humanity. He came to save His people from their sins” (Matt.1: 21).

In Jesus, we not only have his teaching about God but the living God, one that’s not distant from us. He came to us as the Son of God to reveal God self as God of deliverance. Jesus opened the way for us to commune with God. Further, the humanity of Jesus is stated by the Apostle Paul, “Who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection” (Rom.1: 3). This Scripture emphasizes the humanity of Christ and His human lineage. As a revolutionist, Jesus caused radical changes in people lives, and culture as He confronted the political power structure in His society. Jesus sided with the oppressed, and was against religious leaders, intellectuals, economical powers and injustices of any form.

Jesus as liberator entered into society with the poor with a message of liberty to the captives. He blessed the poor, forgave the sinners, and had fellowship with the outcasts. He came to do justice on the earth. In his own words, “Do not think that I come to bring peace on the earth...but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). He came to confront people who were complacent with the status quo. Jesus was concerned about all people. He loved them all: the rich, the poor, the educated or the uneducated, the good, the bad, the indifferent, the woman at the well, widows, Zacchaeus the publican, the outcasts and the heathens. He shared their lives and transformed them.

In love, Jesus redeemed us all as can be seen in the following: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...”(John 3:16). He came to do the will of God on earth. Jesus was sent into the world for our salvation. Jesus continues to intercede on

behalf of humanity as stated in scripture, “[f]or Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands...but He entered into heaven itself ...to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (Heb.9: 24). The Crucified Christ is concerned about our needs because He is Emmanuel, “God with us”(Matt.1: 23).

The Gospel of Luke reflects the sovereignty of God as defined in His Mission. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18-19). This scripture suggests that Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry sought to show humankind the way to bring the Good News, Gospel of salvation, liberation and healing to the least of these (Matt. 25:40).

According to T. Richard Snyder, the church claims “Jesus is the full revelation of God’s intent for humanity. Jesus as the Son of man, Son of God, suffering servant and moral example reveals what and who we are called to be.” Jesus was one with the oppressed, the down trodden and the outcasts.⁹¹

Jesus’ life work reflected his love and compassion for the least of these, (Matt. 25:40). As an African American, Jesus’ mission statement speaks to the circumstances of my heritage, as a descendant of African slaves. Therefore, I can relate to the condition of the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives and those that are bruised. The social conditions, which Jesus addressed, are still prevalent in our society today.

In writing about Jesus’ ministry, Daniel L. Migliore notes that Jesus proclamation and ministry transgressed the supposed boundaries of God’s grace and religious transitions. He was socially and politically active as He aligned himself with the masses to

⁹¹ Ibid., 65.

bring about a new heaven on earth.⁹² “Jesus’ new heaven on earth was blessing the poor, healing the sick, to befriend women and having fellowship with sinners” (Rev.21: 1). However, the critics of the day thought Jesus’ words and actions toward the oppressed were blasphemous and charged Him as a political conspirator

Jesus in my community is still part of our struggles as we continue to worship in the Pastor’s apartment. We continue to empower the poor and the marginalized in the community. As a body of believers, we realize that the church is not a building but a people called by God for liberation of others as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In view of liberating others, it is believed that salvation is an act of liberation. Gustavo Gutierrez states that the theology of salvation must be understood by the third world people who exist in an oppressive-liberation axis. “For Gutierrez, Redemption means political liberation. He states if sin is the root of injustice then the reign of God is the precondition for a just society. God’s liberation is necessary if we are to defeat sinful institutions.”⁹³ Jesus as liberator has assigned ministers and believers to the same role to help defeat sinful institutions in this twenty first century.

It is believed that the ministers’ task in this liberating process is prophetic ministry, which serves to create an “alternative consciousness” in the social system. As Christians, we are challenged to stand within the culture to “nurture, to nourish” and to evoke a consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around. In addition, the primary concern of prophetic ministry is not the specific public crisis, but rather prophetic ministry addresses “in season and out of season” the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient to

⁹² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 146.

⁹³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Well* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1983), 97.

change. This focus should be the underlying of the social problems by attacking the root of the problems.⁹⁴

Further, Walter Malone speaks of another perspective of prophetic ministry. He states the value of prophetic ministry is revolutionary in that its' practice declares the right of every individual, regardless of class, color, country, race or sex, to reach his/her potentials.⁹⁵

On the other hand, Cornel West offers yet another view of prophetic ministry. For him, prophetic ministry is a practice of social change as it seeks to transform a society that expresses economical exploitation and dehumanization. He feels in this process of social practice, every person will have the right to experience what it means to be truly human. Pursuing this further, West states that the prophetic ministry is not without a vision, but includes both existential freedom and social freedom. Existential freedom means sustained life, but ultimately, to be delivered from any bondage. Social freedom on the other hand, is the power to exercise self-realization and the right to practice in a democratic society. As a result of social freedom experienced by, African Americans, two major contributions are listed:

First, it confronts candidly the tragic character of human history...[S]econd, prophetic Afro-American ministry elevates the notion of struggles (against the odds), personal and collective, regulated by the norms of individuality and democracy to the highest priority.⁹⁶

Admittedly, social injustices are not a new phenomenon. Its roots can be found in Biblical records as viewed in the Exodus story. In this story, we see Moses a

⁹⁴ Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 13.

⁹⁵ Walter Malone, *From Holy Power to Holy Profits: African American Images* (Chicago: African American Images, 1994), 51-53.

⁹⁶ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An African American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Press, 1982), 69-91.

representative of Yahweh is called in the Midian desert to go back to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to “Let my people go”(Exod.7: 16). Here we see God’s position is manifested against oppression and injustice. God said to Moses:

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I heard their cry... Indeed, I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians” (Exod. 3:7-8).

As God was against Pharaoh in Egypt, likewise He was against the house of Israel for social injustice and economic oppression. It was at this moment in history that God sent prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah to speak against Israel because it had become wealthy by oppressing the poor. The prophets served to inform Israel that God demanded more than formalism and rituals in worship but justice for the poor.⁹⁷

Further claim of social justice is viewed in the life of Jesus as He walked among the poor, preaching the Good News, healing and delivering the sick and offering salvation to the lost. His desire for the poor was wholeness. Therefore, Jesus stood against all forms of social injustice and oppression:

In Jesus Christ, God takes oppressed race, exploited class and a colonized nation. God, in Jesus Christ, became poor and oppressed the form of “the other as a member of an. The paradox and scandal of the incarnation is that God takes the form of a servant and makes himself one with ‘the other’ (Phil. 2:7-8).

In fighting social injustices, African Americans have always positioned ourselves in a revolutionary posture as we struggle for freedom, civil and human rights. As a people, we never accepted fatalistic mentality, but always lived in a sense of hope collectively. Our sense of hope came through the black church, which served as a prophetic voice and the foundation for the civil rights movement in the United States.

⁹⁷ *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 860.

The prophetic community has always had a voice and a vision in social changes that understood the interrelationship of mystical and social vision to work side by side. We heard the voices of Mohandas Gandhi, Howard Thurman, Dag Hammarskjöld, Abraham Heschel, Martin L. King and Malcolm X, Jessie Jackson and many other prominent leaders. In essence, Malcolm X encouraged black people to give themselves to self-development as opposed to Martin L. King, a social prophet who was committed to a vision of economic empowerment as a part of its stand for social justice.⁹⁸ Although some of the leaders had different approaches in their vision for economic empowerment, however, they shared the same commonality of economic liberation on behalf of the black community.

The prophetic voice is not always in community but as an individual, one that is viewed as marginal with a voice against social ills. For instance Rosa Parks who refused to move to the back of the bus—thereby set in motion a new epic of history. Parks’ refusal to move sparked the Civil Rights Movement headed by Dr. Martin L. King.

Further, we view the prophetic voice of the Biblical prophet Jeremiah, “who knew how to ‘blush’ (to be ashamed) of social conditions of his time” (Jer.6: 26-27). He used his voice of marginality to create new historical possibilities. His charge was that of a prophetic ministry—crying out against injustice to offer hope to the community. He was an individual not impressed with position but conditions, “one that felt anguish of the terror as his city burned down (Jer.6: 26-27). In the same way, a prophetic voice is something we all have to help rid the world of social ills. As Christians we too must take a stand against social conditions in the world as we speak out against injustice.

⁹⁸ Malone, *From Holy Power to Holy Profits*, 51-53.

As a clergy person, my prophetic voice is heard in the community of the political arena and of the social ills as it relates to the church. My voice is also heard in the community in which I live as I seek to have positive influence in the lives of teenagers and others. My hope is to evoke an “alternative consciousness” among the youth.

In light of the impoverished conditions of the single parents of River Park Towers, we find the basis of Jesus’ ministry as reflected in his action, His teaching and in His mission statement: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind...”(Luke 4:18-19). In Jesus’ earthly ministry, He sought to show humankind the way and to treat people fair, as persons of worth, regardless of their social status, cultural differences and/or circumstances and situations. Today, Jesus’ ministry continues to extend to the needs of humankind as reflective of single parents of River Park Towers.

Single-parent families come in all shapes, sizes and colors. The circumstances and situations resulting in single parent families vary:

- Grandparents as single parent
- Death of a spouse
- Unmarried by choice or abandonment
- Separation
- Divorce
- Adoption

Further, African Americans women can be aligned with the Biblical character Hagar that was cast into the desert by Abram and Sarai, but was protected by God Genesis

16:10-a prototype for the struggles of many African Americans women, African slaves, homeless exile, and surrogate mothers.

Delores Williams in *Sisters in the Wilderness* traces the parallel in the history of African American women from slavery to the present. She contends that the Hagar experience has been part of black women's lives. In Hagar's exile conditions, we see the religious resonance of Hagar's sojourn in the wilderness as she encountered God who had a plan for her and her unborn son.⁹⁹ A plan "to multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be numbered... because the Lord has given heed to your affliction" Gen 16:v 10-11 ...So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi;" for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing Him? Therefore, the well was called Beer-lahar-roi." (Gen. 16:13-14).

In addition, God's love and provision is demonstrated in the social condition of the widow of Zarephath and her son who were at the end of their food supply and God provided their needs. "The jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry..."(1Kings 17:15-16). Their lives were changed economically, socially and spiritually. The provision of God toward single parents is evident in Scriptures, but also He the "Father of orphans and protector of widows...God gives the desolate a home to live in; He leads out the prisoners to prosperity..." (Ps.68: 5-7). As Christians, "we are instructed to take care of orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). Just as God through Jesus has aligned himself with the women, and to make provision for them, likewise, He/She will provide for the single parents of River Park Towers—housing complex. Not only will God make provision for the single parents of River Park Towers-socially, economically,

⁹⁹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*,19.

educationally but spiritually as well. Spirituality varies in meaning and is expressed in many forms.

Spiritual

The term spiritually is derived from the Hebrew term, *ruach*. This term has several meanings: Spirit, breath, wind and that which give life and animation to something. The term spirituality is embedded in Christianity as a set of beliefs, a set of values and a way of life.

The River Park Towers Single Parents Ministry will use the beliefs and values of Christianity to weave into the lives of single parents, in hopes of helping them to achieve upward mobility for them and their families. The beliefs and values of Christianity will also serve to provide single parents with a solid foundational basis in which to operate effectively in society. Moreover, there are certain factors necessary for shaping the spiritual life of these single parents. One is how they are educated from a theological perspective and how they respond to personal and denominational issues and the resources made available to them. The way in which single parents can respond from a theological perspective is verbal and visual: listen to devotion, testimonies and sermons as well as to view pictures, films and art. Spirituality runs the gamut and encompasses race, class, and gender thereby, affecting the views of persons as it relates to their personal spirituality.

I will explore the different aspects of spirituality between God and humanity and humanity and God: Prayer, Spiritual Formation, Contemplative Spirituality, Centering Prayer, “Soaking,” Worship, Intercession and Meditation.

Prayer is defined by Dr. Howard Thurman as the movement of the heart of man/woman toward God; a movement that in a sense is within God—God in the heart

sharing its life with God the Creator of all life.¹⁰⁰ The movement of prayer is reflective in the lives of Jesus' disciples when one of them asked him to teach us to pray and was instructed to follow this model of prayer:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins: for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. (Luke 11:1-4)

Although Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He understood the need to pray to God Himself. Prayer was so essential to Jesus that He constantly depended on it to do His ministry and to follow the will of God. Prayer in the life of Jesus is referenced in the following Scriptures:

Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove (Luke 3:21).

In the morning, while it was still very dark, He got up and went out to a deserted place, and there He prayed (Mark 1:35).

After saying good-bye to them, He went up the hill to pray (Mark 6: 46). Taking the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves (Mark 6:41; Matt 14:19, Cf. Mark 8:6,14:22; Matt 26:26; Luke 24:30).

But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear Him...while He kept in lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:15-16) But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. Now during those days He went out to the mountain to pray; and He spent the night in prayer to God (Luke 6:11-12).

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples with him, He asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" (Luke 9:18)

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and up on the mountain to pray. And while He was Praying, the appearance of his face changed, and clothes became dazzling white...Now Peter and his companion were weighed down with sleep; since they had stayed awake; they saw His glory. (Luke 9:28-29; 32)

¹⁰⁰ Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1963), 87.

The seventy returned with Him saying “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us! He said to them, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lighting.”...At the same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit, and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Luke 10: 17-18; 21).

“Simon, Simon, Listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31-32).

He came out and went, as was custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciple followed Him. When He reached the place, He said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” Then, He withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed. Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but your will be done (Luke 22:39-42).

My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34).

Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God (Psalms 31:5; (Luke 23:46)).¹⁰¹

In examining the prayer life of Jesus, we see that He needed time to debrief from the activities of the day. Sometimes He chose the end of the day to relax from the problems of the society; sickness, burdens, pain and sorrows He encounter in serving the people. He took time to breathe and to free His mind from the woes of the day. There were times He walked by the seashore, or went up on a hill, other times He got in a boat to share His innermost secrets with God. Other times, Jesus sought quiet places, “a great while before day” because His nights were sometimes long and wearisome, and full of annoyances.¹⁰² When Jesus rose before day He was able to replenish himself spiritually and emotionally from the heavenly touch of God. (Mark 1: 35)

Another form of prayer is *Spiritual Formation*. Spiritual Formation is another name for *Contemplative Spirituality*. This Spiritual Formation is a movement that has provided a platform and a channel through Contemplative Prayer to entering the church. It

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰² Ibid., 90.

is stated that wherever Spiritual Formation is used, there you will find Contemplative Spirituality. Further stated, Contemplative Spirituality serves as the heartbeat of the spiritual formation movement.

Prior to the 70s and early 80s, the term “Spiritual Formation” was hardly known, except for highly specialized references in relation to the Catholic orders. Today, Spiritual Formation has become widespread within the churches and is deemed indispensable and is essential for spiritual maturity. It is believed that without Spiritual Formation, believers cannot become profound Christians. The more advanced believers are in the process of Spiritual Formation, the greater and more pervasive of their spirituality.

There are several comments on Spiritual Formation from the viewpoint of those responsible to lead in Christ’s program: stillness and silence before the presence of God so that the sediment can settle and water can become clear in one’s spiritual life. Spiritual Formation is beyond prayer, reading of the Scriptures or listening to good teaching to quiet the inner chaos in one’s soul, but the need to experience God’s presence in silence and solitude.

Rick Warren, the author of *The Purpose Driven Church*, suggests that the movement of Spiritual Formation is a neglected function in the church and discipleship. Further stated is the need to reemphasize Spiritual Formation in developing believers to full maturity. Therefore, Spiritual Formation is the focus of this author. Warren underscores the importance of building up Christians and establishing personal spiritual disciplines. This movement has a valid message for the church and serves as a wake-up call to the body of believers.¹⁰³ Pursuing this further, we will view another form of spirituality.

¹⁰³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), 126.

Contemplative Spirituality is a non-biblical practice. It is a belief system that was used in ancient mystical practices to induce altered states of consciousness (the silence) and is rooted in mysticism and occult but is often wrapped in Christian terminology. The premise of Contemplative Spirituality is pantheist (God is all) and pantheistic (God is all in all).¹⁰⁴ This non-biblical practice, Contemplative Spirituality came into the Evangelical church in the mid-seventies by three Monks; a Catholic theologian, an Eastern Zen master, Joshu Rashi Sasak, who taught Buddhist meditation and a former Trappist, Paul Marechal who taught Transcendental Meditation. The interaction between these Christian Monks and practitioners of Easterner meditation helped to distill the practice of Christian Contemplative Prayer in a form that could be easily practiced by diverse array of non-monastic believers---Priests, Nuns, Brothers and laymen and women.¹⁰⁵

For the church's first sixteen centuries, Contemplative Prayer was the goal of Christian Spirituality. On the other hand, this living tradition of Contemplative Prayer was virtually lost after the Reformation. Today, with the cross-cultural dialogue and historical research the recovery of the Christian contemplative heritage has begun the method of Centering Prayer in the tradition of (praying the scriptures) which contributes to this renewal of Spirituality.

Contemplative Spirituality prayer is defined as the opening of the mind and heart—our whole being to God that goes beyond our thoughts, words and emotions. Contemplative Spirituality is a prayer of silence to experience of God's presence from

¹⁰⁴ <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/spiritualformation>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

whom all life emerges at every moment.¹⁰⁶ Further, God's presence emerges through centering prayer.

Centering Prayer is a way of cultivating a relationship with God is refreshing, a way to quiet the mind while maintaining alertness, a path of transformation, a deepening of God's abiding presence and ultimately, to rest in God.¹⁰⁷ Centering prayers is also based on the wisdom saying of Jesus "And whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who is secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:6). Centering Prayer is a method of prayer, which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence. Traditionally, centering prayer was called contemplative prayer. It consisted of responding to the Spirit of Christ by consenting to God's presence and action within. This form of prayer is said to enhance the contemplative prayer by quieting one's faculties to cooperate with the gift of God's presence. Another practice of God presence is soaking.

Soaking¹⁰⁸

The concept of "Soaking" is not a new phenomenon and can be found throughout the Old and New Testament. This is what the Bible has to say:

"GOD, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush Meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction." (Ps. 23:1-3)

I've kept my feet on the ground; I've cultivated a quiet heart. Like a baby content In its mother's arm, my soul is a baby content." (Ps. 131:2)

"Quiet down before God, be prayerful before him. Don't bother with those who climb the ladder, who elbow their way to the top." (Ps. 37:7)

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.centerprayer.com/methodep.htm>.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/spiritualformation>.

¹⁰⁸ All following biblical citations taken from Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Navpress Publishing, 2003).

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matt. 11:28-30)

“The promise of “arrival” and “rest” is still there for God’s people. God himself is at rest. And at the end of the journey we’ll surely rest with God. So let’s keep at it and eventually arrive at the place of rest, not drop out through some sort of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4:9-11)

He energizes those who get tired, give fresh strength to dropouts for even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles. They run and don’t get tired; they walk and don’t lag behind. (Isaiah 40:29-31)

“Stay with God! Take heart. Don’t quit. I’ll say it again: Stay with God.” (Ps. 27:14)

“First pay attention to me, and then relax. Now you can take it easy—you’re in good hands.” (Proverbs 1:33)

“She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said.” (Luke 10:39)

“And now, here’s what I’m going to do; I’m going to start all over again. I’m taking her back out into the wilderness where we had our first date, and I’ll court her. (Hosea 2:14)

Pursuing this further, music in the Old Testament played a major role in “Soaking.”

We see it in the life of the prophet Elisha when he asked for a musician (minstrel) to be brought in his presence to inquire of the Lord for the king of Judah: “But get me a musician” and then while the musician was playing the power of the Lord came on him And he said, Thus say the Lord”... (2 Kings 3:15-16).

We also read that young David was called to soothe Saul with music: “Whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre (harp) and play with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him. (1 Sam. 16:23)

The use of music in the process of “Soaking” served to set the tone for a proper atmosphere for spiritual things to occur in the midst of dire conditions. In Elisha’s situation, the musician played the harp, and the power of the Lord came upon him and he received a prophecy from the Lord. Likewise, in the “soaking” process of Saul who was taunted by an evil spirit and “David provided an atmosphere for spiritual things to happen in the midst of Saul’s dilemma. In the spiritual atmosphere, David played his ‘harp’ and Saul was relieved and the evil spirit departed from him” (1 Sam. 16:23).

The process of “Soaking,” whether with music or without music, sets the tone for a spiritual atmosphere for individuals to enter into the presence of the Lord. Thereby, becoming renewed, relaxed for the continuous spiritual journey ahead. Another form to engage in the presence of the Lord is through worship.

Worship:

The English word worship comes from the Old English word *worþship*, a word that denotes the worthiness of the one receiving the special honor or devotion. Worship is reverent devotion and allegiance pledged to God, the rituals or ceremonies by which this reverence is expressed

Initially, worship services of the early Christians were conducted in private homes. For a time, the first Christians worshiped in the synagogues as well as their private homes. It is believed by some scholars that the Jewish Christians would go to the synagogues on Saturday to worship, and then to their own meeting on Sunday.

In other instances, many early Christians of Jewish background continued to follow the law and custom of their people as they observed the Sabbath and the Jewish Holy days. On the other hand, “the Jewish Sabbath was quickly replaced by the first day of the week,

as the time for public worship”(Acts 20:7; Corn.16: 2) and it was “called the Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10). This was the occasion for celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, since He arose on the “first day of the week” (Mark 16:2).

Another example of worship is reading and studying the Bible of the New Testament. Other details of worship procedures of the early Christians in the New Testament times were spotty. But the elements of worship are thought to have occurred regularly and were included in the weekly worship service.¹⁰⁹ Worship can be viewed in the form of Intercession

Intercession:

Intercession is defined as the act of petitioning God or praying on behalf of another person or group. Because of sin, human beings are separated from God. Therefore, it is necessary for righteous individuals to go before God to seek reconciliation between Him and His fallen creation.¹¹⁰

Admittedly, the Bible reminds us that ongoing sinfulness of a people can hinder the effects of intercession. “If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the Lord; but if someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession?” (1 Samuel 2:25)

The Old Testament lists several examples of intercession. One of the earliest examples of intercession occurred in Genesis 18, where Abraham speaks to God on behalf of Sodom. His plea to God was compassionate as he was concerned with the well being of others rather than with his own needs. The selfless concern of Abraham on behalf of Sodom exemplified the mark of all true intercession.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 1108.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 510.

Another example of intercession is the intercessory prayer of Moses on behalf of the Hebrew people. Moses a leader of a nation, and a righteous man successfully petitioned God for the Hebrew people. “He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet” (Exod.15: 25).

There were other acts of intercession found in the Old Testament, the sacrifices and prayers of the priests. “It shall be a regular burnt offering throughout your generation at the entrance of the tent of meeting before the Lord, where I will meet with you, to speak to you there” (Exod.30: 7). These acts of intercession pointed forward to the work of Christ, who was and is the greatest intercessor.

We see the act of intercession in the life of Jesus when He prayed on behalf of Peter. “But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brother” (Luke 22:32) and for His disciples, “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may sanctified in truth” (John 17:19) that they may be one; “As your Father are in me and I am in you” as it reflect (John 21). Christ’s intercessory work did not cease when He returned to heaven. In heaven, He continues to intercede for His church (Heb.7: 25), not only the church but also the “Holy Spirit pleads on behalf of the individual Christians” (Rom. 8:26-27). Finally, as Christians, “we are urged to intercede for all people” (1 Tim. 2:1). In interceding for others, we can begin by meditation on the scriptures.

Meditation:

We can get a good idea of the meaning of meditation by examining the context where the concept and words of meditation are found. Meditation is especially prominent

in (Psalm 77). This Psalm is the voice of Asaph who laments about his sorrows and distress; verses 10-20 report how he rose above his problems by meditating on the Lord. In Asaph's distress, he recalled happier days of the past. In his long nights of suffering he meditated on what he had learned of God, from His Word during his good time of life. He was able to recall God's former deeds. Asaph made a decision about his despondency and decided that he would meditate on all of God's works and considered meditating on all of God's mighty deeds. Thus, the Psalmist deep despondency gave way to God.

Meditation is stated as a function of the heart that is of the whole person. Further, meditation is stressed in the following scriptures: Psalm 19:14, which read, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." In Isaiah 33:18, which states, "Your mind will muse on the terror; Where is the one who counted...." The goal of meditation, according to Psalm 49:3 is understanding--not as frequently stressed as in Oriental religions and some cults of our day that stresses self-abnegation.

In order to meditate, it is believed that one must not try to empty oneself in order that the divine can flow through almost in a pantheistic way God and universe are identical. Rather, to bring the whole person-body, soul, and mind to focus on God, His works and His Words.¹¹¹

Furthermore, meditation focuses on the Word of God as noted in Joshua 1:8 which "commands meditation on the book of the law all through the day and the night." On the contrary, Psalm 11 expounds on meditation in a broader sense, God's precept, vv.15, 78; His decrees vv 23, 48; His law 97; His statues v 99; and His promises 148. In other words,

¹¹¹ Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 169.

the mind of the mediator is not to be blank or empty, but to be filled with the Scriptures, the Word of God at all times.

Moreover, the art and practice of meditation on the Scriptures play an important role in one's devotional use of the Bible. Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva contend that meditation is presented in Scriptures as an act of worship, one that involves communion with God.

Admittedly, their concept of meditation is different from Eastern religions and modern Western cults. Eastern religions and Western cults view meditation as an avenue of escape as the individual is absorbed or mingled with the divine in some unspecified process. Kaiser and Silva define meditation on Scriptures as to its object, its method of practice and its result.¹¹² Meditation is one of the spiritual practices to be implemented in the lives of single parents of River Park Tower.

The single parents of River Park Towers, a poverty-stricken community, had experienced decades of social transition without meditation on Scriptures. Thus, they had become spiritually depleted. The way I developed meditation on Scriptures among the un-churched group of single parents was through actualized spiritual meditation in an informal small group setting. I believed that meditation in the form of small groups was less likely to intimidate the un-churched single mothers as opposed to a larger setting or the setting of a formalized church.

In addition, meditation in small groups served to initiate a spiritual connection between the church and community, no longer estranged but becoming one in community. This Scripture embodies the idea, "So we being many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

¹¹² Ibid., 168.

Further, I explored other forms of meditation; all night prayer, journal writing and/or small group Bible study in the home of the single parents. Spiritual meditation will also served as a tool to empower these mothers/parents to engage in the struggles of their own social demise.

Meditation on Scripture has been an important part of my spiritual journey. The process of meditation was introduced to me as a young child by my parents. I was given a small Bible to read daily and to carry in my travels, and like Asaph in (Psalm 77), in my sorrows and distress, I was able to rise above my circumstances. Meditation is a practice that can be done in silence, in public and in reading the Scriptures corporately with other believers.

I recommended meditation in the small group with the single parents of River Park Towers in order to begin the process of spiritual transformation in their personal lives to extend to every facet of their lives. Small group meditation practice is the backdrop of my Demonstration project and will be noted for transforming the lives of single parents in the history of Morris Heights community in the Bronx, New York. Small group meditation for the single parents of River Park Towers originated from the history of Praise Temple A.M.E church.

Chapter 4

Historical

The single parent ministry of Praise Temple African Methodist Episcopal Church is unique in its origin. The ministry extended from a parenting class four year ago, 1999, when Janet Brown (not her real name), a single mother of the congregation, sought help in acquiring new parenting strategies to assist her in parenting her eleven-year-old daughter, Jackie (not her real name). Jackie's behavior had become one of rebellion and disrespect toward her mother as her interest in boys increased.

Pastor Shirley R. Dowling, of Praise Temple A.M.E. Church, a divorced mother of three, identified with the parenting concerns of the single mother, Ms. Brown. In order to plan and implement a single parent's ministry, Rev. Dowling determined that based on my forty years of experience as a single parents and grandmother, I would be competent to initiate a program to afford parenting skills to the single parents of the church. Therefore, I was authorized to develop a methodology that would be practical and effective for single mothers in crisis. Although a graduate of *Blanton-Peale Graduate Institute of Pastoral Counseling*, with a certificate as a Specialist in Pastoral Care, I still lacked confidence to initiate a program for single parents.

The idea of teaching a parenting class without any formal teacher-training experience was frightening to me. Although I had survived and successfully raised my two children, I did not have a curriculum or guide in order to teach other single parents.

Developing a parenting class lingered in my thought for a while until one day a frantic Ms. Brown came to church and blurted out in desperation, "When are we going to

have this parenting class? I can not take it anymore!” Upon hearing the desperate cry of Ms. Brown, I felt compelled to help her with some parenting strategies. Ms. Brown had already taken drastic measures, since she was known to take her daughter into the hallway and leave her naked as a form of punishment. It was Ms. Brown’s conduct and behavior toward her daughter that helped me to launch the single parent ministry in May 1999.

During the first phase of the parenting seminar, a meeting was scheduled to convene all of the single mothers in the church to discuss the various aspect of parenting. Prior to Bible study, we met to discuss parenting issues. The meeting was held on Wednesdays from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. Discussions ranged from contemporary issues of parenting skills to assist the single parents in recalling their childhood and their parents’ parenting skills.

The group adopted the theme “A Changing Generation” admittedly, suggesting a need for mothers to alter their skills in order to address the needs of their children in the 21st Century. Some of the issues related to their socio-economic background, inadequate housing, the need for support group for childcare, after school program, unemployment, the lack of quality education for their children and the need for pastoral counseling. The mothers of the group were depressed by the plight of their social dilemma.

At this level of the program, a large portion of the meeting was used for participants to discuss their frustration as single parents. Additional meetings were held via telephone. The meeting and telephone contact of the single mothers served to launch the parenting class to the formation of a single parent’s ministry.

The approach to launch the single parent ministry became holistic because of their many needs. As the group of mothers continued to meet, I began to implement time

management schedules, encouraged journal writing and discussions on time spent outside of the home away from their children. Additional discussions included the importance of job training, securing a GED diploma, resources for opportunities, leadership training and the availability of church resources.

In October 1999, the second phase of the program allowed the mothers to state the various reasons for their early and/or unwanted pregnancy. The reasons included: drug abuse by family members, abandonment by fathers, victim of date rape, dysfunctional families that provided the women with no emotional and/or financial support.

In May of 2000, the focus of the ministry shifted when the single mothers were given the opportunity to discuss their children. Alternatively, the children were also given a chance to express their feelings. The children had many issues but were unable to express their feelings toward their parents. Their issues included: attraction towards the opposite sex, understanding the anatomy of their bodies, parental discipline, and lack of communication between their parents. Parents later agreed to discuss some of the children's concerns in an informal, round table discussion with parents and their children together. As a result, parents and children were able to converse more freely.

The other ministries of the church that coincided with the single parent ministry were: Childcare, After School Programs, Pastoral Counseling, Leadership, Tutorial Program, Workshop Training, Food Distribution Program for low income families (SHARE) and other related ministries. Along with the various ministries of the church, the church served as a job site for the Summer Youth Employment Project (SYEP). In addition, the church employed one of the single parent as a childcare assistant. Consequently, the single parent gained independence from the Welfare System.

The single parent ministry has served to transform the mothers of the group, socially, economically, and spiritually as they have continued to strive for higher learning, better employment, and suitable housing for their families. As a result of the transformation in the lives of the single parents in the church, they have become equipped to assist in formulating a single parent ministry in the River Parks Towers housing complex to enable other single parents to be transformed by the resources of the church. One of the spiritual methods used to transform single parents is the practical methodology of a small group.

Practical Methodology: Small Groups

Small group ministry is not a new phenomenon and has provided a way for creative response for growing needs in communities for meaningful care and sharing. According to Paul Hosten, Chairperson of small Group Ministry, small groups are as much “church” as the larger convening of believers. Thus, “church” is not a building but a body of believers.¹¹³

One example of such a group according to Peter Hodgson and Robert King was the African slaves in America who were indoctrinated in the religion of their masters which later became the underground church as the slaves gathered secretly to worship God.¹¹⁴

Furthermore, small group ministry can be traced to my denomination of Methodism, founded by Charles and John Wesley in the early 1700s’. The two brothers established “classes” in small group subdivision of their followers who formed “societies.” These societies served as a place of devotion, prayer, praise, testimonies, exhortations that

¹¹³ Small Group Ministries, <http://www.centralpc.org/ministry/smallgroup/htm>.

¹¹⁴ Peter C. Hodgson and Robert King, *Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 267.

enhanced personal and spiritual growth, development through prayer, self-examination, witnessing and the fellowship of believers.

There were other small religious “societies” in England for the fellowship of believers. Wesley’s system of small groups was designed to help believers to seek a more intimate relationship with Jesus. In addition, the small group ministry led to massive Methodist movement.¹¹⁵

Ultimately, small groups were the basis of Jesus’ ministry as He called His disciples. He called them in small groups of twelve and seventy to train them for larger convening of believers. The small group ministry of Jesus is also reflected in His command of His followers: “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another” (John15: 17). The answer to this is found in (James 5:16), “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another...” Finally, the last command is given...“be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (Eph. 4:32), which can only be obeyed and experienced in small groups.

Today, in the 21st Century, small group ministries continue to be essential in providing healthy fellowship in communities, marked by Christian love and oneness. Without small group ministries, some believers could easily become lost in the crowd, to feel lonely, although surrounded by other worshipers.

Small groups provide the opportunity for all believers to be known and cared for and to find their niche in ministry. Also, believers grow faster spiritually in a caring interactive group. Lastly, small group ministry is a gathering of not more than 12 people

¹¹⁵ Nolan B. Harmon. *Understanding the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1983), 9-11.

that meet regularly with a common purpose to experience the gift of Christian community.¹¹⁶

My church has in place a small group—single parent ministry that has been instrumental in helping single mothers return back to the faith community. These parents have been transformed by utilizing the resources of the church. As a result of the small group ministry of Praise Temple church, mothers have achieved GED diplomas, became independent of public assistance and have become gainfully employed. This core team of single parents will assist me, the facilitator to expand the small group ministry to River Park Towers, which will encompass the holistic approach.

The ministry of Praise Temple A.M.E. church is designed to serve single parents in a small group setting. We met in an informal setting (a circle) to discuss the complexities of being single parents. This setting has enabled the mothers to become growth agents for each other, as they better understand the dynamics of parenting. The importance of this group is effective communication skills, powerful networking and building trust among themselves. Ultimately, this group will serve as mentors to the single parents of River Park Towers.

As the single parent ministry of Praise Temple church served to transform the core team socially, emotionally, educationally, economically and spiritually, likewise the core team group will also serve to transform the lives of other single parents of River Park Towers. In the process of transforming the lives of single parents, goals needed to be established.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

Strategies

The Family Resource Center of River Park Towers of the Bronx, New York is a non-profit organization that gave special attention to the single parents of River Parks Towers. The organization was founded on the single parents ministry of Praise Temple and of Biblical and Theological principles. This program served as a resource center to enable parents and their children to transition from impoverished living conditions to a life of upward mobility. Resources available were: childcare services, after school tutorial program, parenting classes, pastoral counseling, dental hygienist, financial advisor, entrepreneurial advisement, civic leader, school teacher, Bronx Council woman, arts and crafts (collages and crocheting) and spiritual guidance.

In January, February, March and May 2005, the core team/site team of my demonstration project visited the Family Resource Center of River Park Towers on a monthly basis. The core team single parents shared their testimonies prior to attending the single parent ministry of Praise Temple church and how the resources of the ministry helped them to achieve an optimum level of living.

Some of the single parents of Praise Temple church, earned GED's high school diplomas, completed college, earned college credits, gained employment and freedom from public assistance. One of the single parents earned her B.A. degree in English and is presently in pursuit of her master's degree. She has also become a homeowner and a car owner.

Strategies for development offered by Family Resource Center were counseling, small group setting, communication and job skills. I began each meeting with a brief meditation, songs and prayer. Guests from outside agencies visited the program to offer

their resources---a psychotherapist, and a project director for family support, from Saint John's hospital in Brooklyn, New York.

The single parents of River Park Towers were able to ask pertinent questions of the core team/site team members regarding the resources of the single parents ministry of Praise Temple church. The Core Team/Site Team was able to answer their questions and begin the process of enrollment for the program. This program was really beneficial as a resource for single parents and their children. We are grateful for the staff participants in the program. The program is on going.

The end of May 2005, the core team/site team did a follow up of the new members with continuation of encouragement of Bible teaching, testimonies and their process for re-entering the work force of society. There was a contact person of the Family Resource Center to help the single parents and their children with any situation that occurred. For example, how to go on job interviews, computer workshops etc. These resources were available on the premises of River Park Towers Tenants' Association building. This aspect of the project led to a broad conscious awareness among the church leader.

Goals

Goal #1: Consciousness Raising /Church Leaders

In the beginning of this project the following is the method I used to raise consciousness awareness in Brooklyn/Westchester church leaders of the need to develop communication with single parents and their children of River Park Towers housing complex, Bronx, New York. This was done through workshops, bulletins, flyers, lectures, and via word of mouth.

In May 2005, church leaders' consciousness was raised when they visited the impoverished community of River Park Towers housing complex and saw the many needs of the single parents. They saw parents that were frustrated, broken in spirit because of their social conditions as they searched for outside intervention to assist them in their present demise. Raising their children alone without effective parenting skills, emotionally shackled by their impoverished condition, they were unable to garner the resources to enable them to rise above their social conditions. The parents seemed not to have hope for the future, for themselves or for their children. Their plight was dreary. Others in the nearby neighborhood viewed this community of the single parents as the 'forgotten one' who refused to visit River Park Towers high-rise complex because of its impoverished conditions.

Upon the church leaders visit to River Park Towers high-rise complex the group gathered with the facilitator to discuss a plan of action to assist the single parents and their children.

Goal #2: Training Goals/Single Parents For Empowerment

The following is the method I used to develop single parents proficiency skills needed for personal, social, educational, recreational and spiritual empowerment. For empowerment of single parents, a workshop was held July 2005. I began the workshop by using various techniques and skills learned in Pastoral Care for training and facilitating single parents.

- A) By sharing life stories in small group setting and through journaling.
- B) By naming the oppression in themselves and coming to grip with their problems.
- C) By setting individual goals and goals for the group.

I used one excellent technique found in Thomas Moore's, *Care for the Soul*¹¹⁷ that would allow single parents different ways of regarding daily life and the quest for happiness. One of the ways suggested to care for the soul is by buying or renting a good piece of land, selecting an appropriate school or program of study, painting his/her house/bedroom etc. Care of the soul is a continuous process that concerns itself not so much with 'fixing' a central flaw as with attending to the small details of everyday life as well as making major decisions for change. Afterward the single parents kept a journal of all of the things that oppressed them and set group goals and individual goals and to destroy any and every situation that caused them to be oppressed.

Through Pastoral Counseling and listening techniques I was able to facilitate single parents in their struggles by using Cognitive therapy held in small group sessions to help single parents to name the root of their problems by asking what their problems were and to confront those problems. The single parents agreed with this technique of therapy and

¹¹⁷ Thomas Moore, *Care for the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: Harper, 1994).

were happy to have therapy in a small informal setting, as a result parents were able to share their experiences in private session. For some, this was their first experience in therapy. This was a very successful workshop.

Goal #3: Training Goal/Back Home Setting

To develop an effective single parents ministry, Family Resource Center in as many churches in the Brooklyn Westchester District as possible. Single parents ministry is known throughout the Brooklyn Westchester District, not only Brooklyn District but other denominations as well. This ministry will serve as a model for other churches. The model will be a guide for what single parents are really like, what their needs are, how to effectively minister to them and their children, orientation on their living conditions, how to become a volunteer in the single parents ministry and to introduce the single parents ministry beyond the walls of the church.

Bases Of Support

In the beginning the project was financed by the Facilitator, Reverend Rena C. White for the first few weeks. Later in the program, donations were given by my church, Praise Temple A.M.E. church of the Bronx, NY; Mariner's Temple Baptist church, Manhattan, NY; the core team/site team and the River Park Towers community. Other contributors were the single parents who attended the Family Resource Center. In addition, Mrs. Annie F. Johnson a well-respected member of the River Park Towers Community organized weekly donations from the neighborhood 99 Cents Store and the C-Town supermarket. The River Park Tower Tenants' Association was also a great support, as they attended the program every Saturday and participated in the activities of games, movie and

the book club. The above allies continued to provide ideas for the on-going Demonstration Project to the very end, six months later.

Meanwhile, leadership and spiritual guidance was already in place at Praise Temple church. As members of Praise Temple church we were equipped in various ministries to assist the single parents of River Park Towers: Leadership Seminars, Parenting Seminars, Teaching Ministry, Bible study, Pastoral Counseling, Church School Ministry, and Childcare, etc. As a result, we were prepared to offer resources to the single parents of River Park Towers.

Evaluation of Goals

Goal #1

The following is a brief overview and summary of the “action” aspect of my project and the developmental process employed. The materials used in this project served to increase the awareness of the Brooklyn Westchester District of the need to develop communication with single parent and their children of River Park Towers’ high-rise complex. The way in which communication was established between the single parents and Brooklyn Westchester District was through workshops, lectures, flyers, bulletin and word of mouth and was completed by September 2005. The materials used for workshops can be found in the appendices.

In the beginning of the project, facilitator and church leaders met with the Tenants’ Association to brainstorm the possibility of a program for single parents. The result of the meeting ended on a positive note. The idea of program for single parents was well received by the Tenants’ Association who felt that the project was a much needed resource to help address some of the social concerns of single parents and their children. Permission was granted for the use of space in the Tenants’ Association building. Meanwhile, preparation for space of the project began soon after.

The end of September 2005, orientation and workshops were held in River Park Towers Tenants’ Association building. In attendance were Praise Temple ministerial staff, core team/site team, members of the River Park Towers community, and members from Mariner’s Temple Baptist church. A brief overview of the high population of single parents needs was presented by the president of the Tenants’ Association, Mr. Calvin Jones (not his real name) and myself. (See copies of workshop materials in appendix). Materials

were distributed which included hand outs of orientation and workshop for single parents ministry volunteers which included testimonies from senior single parents and core team of their experiences and their successes. Also, excerpts from T.D. Jakes book, “Help I Am Raising My Children Alone!” Sheron Patterson’s book, “ New Faith” and Juanita Bynum’s Video, “No More Sheets” and the personal testimony of the Facilitator role as a single parent.

Goal #2

Several churches responded to the invitation. Two churches in the Brooklyn Westchester District and one Baptist Church took the next step to set-up **Family Resource Centers** in their churches or communities surrounding their churches for single parents/children. These churches are coming to workshops for continued training in developing a Family Resource Centers.

Criteria for Evaluation of Personal Growth

Journals were kept and personal growth was evaluated by single parents, site team members and a community leader in November 2005. The evaluation reflected their personal feelings and insights concerning River Park Towers complex, Councilperson of their district and the development of this project. They were interviewed personally and indicated that the project was a great learning experience. All participants expressed that they had grown tremendously and felt honored by participating in this project. They indicated that it was a process in the development of the project, hard work, faithfulness and dedication. They wish to thank the candidate for her perseverance, persistency and professional mannerism in arranging meetings, being prompt and always with a written agenda. The Team is looking forward to working in counseling centers of other churches

to help other single parents and children to achieve optimum living. This portion of the project ended in May 2006.

Conclusion

The following is a reflection of my personal feeling, insights concerning this project and my faith journey.

During my faith journey in the Doctoral Program it became clear to me as an assistant Pastor and Pastoral Counselor in the River Park Towers housing complex and my work with single parents that effective listening, ministering and sharing stories can help heal lives that have been bruised, battered and broken by the struggles of life.

I believe the Family Resource Center has helped to bridge the gaps between single parents and their children and community and church, thereby, making community one with the church. I believe that all things are possible with God and we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. I have witnessed lives changed, new determination born into the heart and minds of countless lives.

I have already become aware of a shift in my approach to Pastoral Care through theological studies at New York Theological Seminary and that of Clinical Pastoral Education at Blanton Peale Institute. Yet, with all the structural considerations in the transformation of the community of River Park Towers, I still return to a basic statement, what the FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER (Church Beyond the Wall) needs is hope for the hopeless.

As a Black Woman, Pastoral Care in a multi-ethnic environment is sometimes difficult for a variety of reasons. It is difficult to witness the perpetuation of young girls/women getting pregnant without education and effective parenting skills, unmarried

and living in poverty. As a divorced single parent of two that overcame similar social conditions, I came with a sense of urgency to challenge the social conditions of these single parents. Ministry beyond the walls of the church is exciting and different. What is different is not waiting for the parents to come to the church but for the church to come to them. Ultimately, to let the single parents know that I am one of them, a divorced single parent of two, therefore, I can identify with them and their plight. In the same way I achieved optimum living they can to.

Some people would never minister outside of the church because it is a difficult and complex thing to do. From the onset, ministry for me began outside of the church in the park to the homeless population, women with cerebral palsy in a group home and for the past sixteen years, I have ministered in a high-rise apartment known as the “House Church” that is modeled after the early church of the First Century Christians as follows: *And every day in the Temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.* (Acts 5:42). This ministry can be considered the invisible church in that wherever believers gather to sing, pray, thereby to experience the true liberative meaning of the Holy Spirit. I am excited about the change that has occurred in the lives of the single parents of River Park Towers as a result of the Family Resource Center. As a woman assistant Pastor, I do not have a problem ministering in this type of environment because it where God has called me to. It is through God’s power that lives are transformed, souls are fed and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. These single parents have experienced abandonment, loss of self-esteem and self-respect, anger, loneliness and fear. Without some form of intervention in the lives of these parents, they will continue to perpetuate having children and living in poverty.

In the ministry of the Family Resource Center, the Holy Spirit will break down barriers and walls that separate these parents from society. This ministry seeks to have unity and peace in the body of Christ even in a housing complex. Ephesians 2:14 says, “For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle walls of partition between us.” I believe a good minister is one who helps to bridge gaps between single parents and their children, between community and church leaders. I believe along with the team members and the community leaders one hundred percent, that this demonstration project was a success.

Chapter 5

Ministerial Competencies

1. The Process

A. The Site Team Formation and Composition

The members of my Site Team served diligently in the implementation of my D. Min project. They put forth time and energy in joining with the candidate in the process of the competency assessment. The site team members contend that the single parent ministry is a much-needed ministry in the church and beyond its walls of the Park Towers housing complex. Admittedly, the site team enjoyed being a part of a church that served as a catalyst for spiritual and social changes in the community. Majority of the members resided in the Morris Heights Section of the Bronx, New York. Inclusive of the site team were the core team single parents of praise Temple. The members of the site team were:

1. Reverend Shirley R. Dowling, M.S. Ed, Pastor of Praise Temple A.M.E. church; candidate for Master's Degree at Drew Theological Seminary, located in Madison, N.J. I have known Pastor Dowling approximately twenty years and have served in her ministry for the past sixteen years.

2. Ms. Effie Johnson, M.S. Ed, at P.S. 230x, Bronx, N.Y. I have had the pleasure of knowing her for ten years. She is a member of Praise Temple church. We have served together in the same ministry. Ms. Johnson has been a very vital part of the Demonstration Project.

3. Ms. Raynelle Hall attended New York Technical College for a year and is currently employed as an Administrative Assistant. She is a member of Praise Temple church. I have known her for ten years.

4. Ms. Vermu Ford, a Dental Hygienist and an associate member of Praise Temple church, was very instrumental in the Demonstration Project as she engaged the young children in games, reading, etc. She also shared in the adult activities with the group of single parents. I have known her for twelve years.

5. Ms. Tia Dowling earned a B.A. Degree from John Jay in “Deviant Behavioral” and Social Control. She is a caseworker for (ACS) Adoption Childcare Service for the city of New York. Ms. Dowling is a member of Praise Temple Church and the daughter of the Pastor. I have known her for eighteen years.

6. Ms. Sonia Johnson, a paraprofessional at P.S. 230x, of the Bronx, N.Y. She is a member of Praise Temple church. Ms. Johnson was a vital part of the Demonstration Project, assisting me in every endeavor of the program. I am eternally grateful for her support every Saturday for six months. I have known her for ten years as we served in the same congregation.

7. Mr. Elwin Ford a Financial Advisor. Mr. Ford taught the single parents of Demonstration Project about “money management” and other financial matters. He is a member of Praise Temple church. I have known him approximately eight years.

8. Mr. Leon Johnson, President of the Tenants’ Association of the River Park Towers housing complex. Mr. Johnson was very instrumental in assisting me in the development of the Family Resource Center. He organized and provided space for the group, formally known as single parents group. He also approved of the naming of the Family Resource Center. The process of Ministerial Competencies leads to steps employed in the assessment process.

B. Steps Employed in the Assessment

The meetings occurred at Praise Temple A.M.E. church in the Bronx, New York. The site team and facilitator met after morning worship at 3:00 P.M. on January 23, 2003 for the competency evaluation. Minimal time was spent with site team regarding the evaluation process. We gathered around the dining room table to review the competency evaluation, which was given by Dr. George McClain, mentor of the D. Min Project at NYTS. The core team members were also included and are listed under the section of Praise Temple African Methodist Episcopal church, p. 17. The site team members are as follows:

Reverend Shirley R. Dowling, Effie Johnson, Tia Dowling, Sonia Johnson, Raynelle Hall, Vermu Ford, Elwin Ford and Leon Johnson. Members of the site team felt my Demonstration Project was workable and a much needed ministry. A second meeting was held on April 15, 2003, at Praise Temple church. All other meetings were held at Praise Temple church, Bronx, N.Y. In the process of competency evaluation I followed the outline used in the competency package.

In meeting with the core team/site team members, we began our meeting in prayer, reading of the Scripture, follow by the distribution of the instruments. The facilitator spent minimal time to explain Code words. Questions were answered and we closed the meeting and set the date for the next meeting. At the second meeting, tasks were assigned. Mr. Elwin Ford was chosen as coordinator. The third competency meeting, members met to discuss competency assessment and format for the presentation of the findings of the candidate. Further discussion among the site team involved expressing their feeling about the competency process of the candidate, followed by the distribution of a questionnaire in

written form. The coordinator, Mr. Ford, read all the competency forms and the candidate expressed her feelings of acceptance. Afterward, Competency Assessment was brought to a close as various competencies were selected.

C. Competencies Selected for this Project

1. The areas I chose to work on are the following:

a. As leader: To develop and grow in the areas of delegating responsibilities. I will use as a resource Frank Damazio, *The Making of a Leader*¹¹⁸ to teach site team and church leaders in preparation to help single parents set time, scheduling of their lives, setting boundaries and to empower them to become self-sufficient before the end of the program.

b. As Counselor: To develop in the areas of time management. I will use Merriel Douglas' book, which focuses on the methodology for time management.

Evaluation

1. As leader, I will delegate responsibilities to capable church leaders.
 - a. I will initiate a process of matching the gifts of church leaders with a set of appropriate task.
 - b. I will allow the site team to choose a set of appropriate task to match the list of church leaders.
2. I will embark on a time management plan.
 - a. An analysis of current time habits.
 - b. Keep record for one week of how time is spent
 - c. Divide how time is spent for the week into basic categories.
 - d. Observe and note any significant change from day to day.
 - e. Use the books as resources to keep me on tract. These steps of evaluation will be logged in the journal of summation.

The Journal Summation will be read by the coordinator, Mr. Elwin Ford, and the site team. The Journal Summation will have a narration of different sessions taught and the

¹¹⁸ Frank Damazio, *The Making of a Leader* (Portland, Oregon: City Bible Publishing, 1988).

responsibilities carried out. The Journal Summation of my activities as a resource person and time I spent with church leaders will reflect time, dates of appointment and information shared with participants that will be kept on file.

The Assessment

The following is a summary of the site teams and the candidate assessments of Ministerial Competencies, style and religious authenticity according to the relative categories in the questionnaire as it relates to the candidate religious training.

Theologian

- A. She is an active learned member of society and church world. Her past and present church can testify to her training.
- B. Rena constantly seeks higher learning in the institutions of religion.
- C. She is a graduate of A.M.E. Institute of Religious studies, Blanton-Peale Graduate Institute as Pastoral Counselor.
- D. Rena is a graduate of New York Mission Society (Black Women in Ministry Program).
- E. She is also graduated from WTC (World Trade Center) seminar and completed the A.R.C. (American Red Cross) Spiritual Care course related to DR # 787, Disaster Orientation and Training. Upon completion of the seminars, Certificates were awarded to the candidate.
- F. She is knowledgeable and well versed in many subjects. She continues to seek new information daily, through reading of the Bible, other literature, leadership seminars, women's retreats, parenting seminars, Internet and other visual technologies.

- G. Rena uses the church as her launching pad, as she is very active in the various activities of the church, including teaching, pastoral counseling and preaching.
- H. Rev. White teaches the Word of God through leadership seminars and Church-School to adult learners, as they are encouraged and strengthened to live a more fruitful life.
- I. Rena has a good understanding of the doctrine and the historical development of the church.
- J. Through Rena's studies she is able to think critically and to reflect theologically in her daily experiences.
- K. Rena is rooted in Christ and will take a stand for Him in any social setting. She remains steadfast in the things of God even when she is misunderstood for her belief or is abandoned because of it. Her information is always referenced.
- L. In Rena's pursuit of education she has grown academically, developed socially and professionally. She contends that her achievements are worthless unless she is able to help transform someone else's life. The candidate has referred others to Blanton-Peale Graduate Institute Program and has shared other resources of her learning.
- M. The candidate's experience as a single parent served to encourage other single parents to achieve upward mobility--socially, educationally, economically and spiritually.
- N. She uses the skills and techniques of her clinical training from Blanton Peale-Graduate Institute (Pastoral Counseling) to help individuals to understand their potential within. Lastly, She surrounds herself with the things of God and the activities of her church.

Ecumenist

A. She interacts well with people of various faiths and respects them in their beliefs. Rena has friends in various religions, which enabled her to have open dialogue without being judgmental. She has attended worship services of the Muslim faith, Jehovah Witness, Baptist, Pentecostal, United Methodist, Catholic and Non-Denominational. Rev. White also preached at Marble Collegiate church an interfaith denomination.

B. The candidate has ministered in group-homes to women of various religions-- Jewish, Catholic, etc. The agenda for the interfaith group were songs, reading of Scriptures and prayer. The clients of the group home were physically challenged (Cerebral Palsy). Some clients were unable to speak or walk; yet they responded to the Holy Spirit they experienced in worship with a smile and the clapping of hands.

C. She also performed a memorial service at a hospital of interfaith employees. The service was held in a Chapel at the hospital of Special Surgery where various denominations attended and she was well received.

D. The candidate also ministered to non-denomination and un-churched people in the neighborhood---these individuals that sit in the park during the summer months. She also distributes religious pamphlets, the daily wordbooks and has dialogue with them. After the dialogue with them a prayer is rendered. Her granddaughter, Amani assisted her in distributing religious materials.

E. Rena also ministers to people of the underground subway station where drugs addicts and prostitute women socialize. She meets them in passing, greets them by saying, "Praise the Lord" which gets their attention. In her dialogue with these women, she learned that most of them had some religious background. These women inquired of the

candidate's religious belief and about her church. After sharing a little about herself, she sang a song and prayed for them. Most of the women accepted prayer while holding onto their cigarettes or their alcoholic beverages.

F. Another example of interfaith group is the Family Resource Center of River Park Towers that heralds a wide spectrum of individuals from various religious backgrounds. In our meetings, spiritual practices were incorporated with the other activities of the Family Resource Center. On a weekly basis, 3-25 participated in the Family Resource Center for some form of spiritual practices.

Leader

- A. The candidate is always willing to demonstrate her leadership quality.
- B. She likes to share the responsibility of leadership. An example; every week she assigned members to teach leadership class to help develop their gifts and talents.
- C. Rena has learned how to delegate responsibilities to others.
- D. She has the ability to seize any task fearlessly to ensure programs or projects are executed.
- E. She is known to attack projects in the church single-handedly.
- F. Rena organized and administered a "Prayer Breakfast" for Women in Ministry. Afterward, she led the women in worship.
- G. As leader, she assesses a situation and responds to the needs whether in church, family gatherings or social groups settings.
- H. Reverend White also organized a "Brunch" for single parents to have a day of fun, which was the kick-off of her Demonstration Project. The "Brunch" was a success.

- I. She served as the Director of Christian Education and met with leader to strategize ways to enhance the Christian Education department of the church.
- J. Reverend White effectively ministered to single parents and their adolescent children to have better communication skills. She used Pastoral Counseling skills to help parents and adolescents; as a result, parents and children changed their communication tactics and were transformed into pleasant, understanding human beings.
- K. Reverend White has served as Assistant to the Pastor for sixteen years and in the Pastor's absence she is giving the authority to be in charge of the church.
- L. She is multi-talented with the ability to perform multi-tasks in various situations.

Religious Educator:

- A. Used the tool of story telling in ministry.
- B. Incorporate humor and life experiences to make sermon more relatable.
- C. Reverend White is great in her one- on-one approach to adolescents.
- D. She held "Sex Education Seminars" for adolescents by using an honest and open approach to allow feedback from the adolescents regards their feeling about sex or their experiences with sex.
- E. She never assumes she knows what is best for the group but inquires of them what their needs are then she will lend her support to them.
- F. Reverend White conducted a Contemplative Spiritual seminar for single parents to allow the parents to experience a different form of spiritually.

Pastor/Shepherd

- A. Reverend White's background in ministry is unique and has been outside of the church. She has ministered in the park to the homeless, in group homes, underground subway station where drug addict and prostitutes gathered in the park, housing complexes and lastly in the high rise church in the Pastor's apartment for the past sixteen years. Regardless of location of ministry, Reverend White will serve wherever there is a need. She has also ministered in hospitals and hospices within the patient's home. She believes that her ministry is to help individuals to live but also to help them to die with dignity. She comforts the patients' with love, kindness, and compassion---thereby, reflecting the ministry of Jesus.
- B. Reverend White is a very caring and compassionate person. I have observed her interaction with the parishioners, the elderly and the homebound. She extends her services to perform funerals for family members who are unable to pay.
- C. Reverend White is excellent in counseling single parents and their children. She doesn't meet any stranger but welcomes everyone. She is a great encourager and has a great sense of humor. She makes children and adults laugh.
- D. Reverend White does outreach ministry via telephone.

Administrator:

- A. Reverend White delegates responsibilities to other leaders.
- B. Performs effective and efficiently in assigned task.
- C. She ministered to the homeless, in group homes, underground subway station where drug addict and prostitutes gathered, in the park and housing complexes.
- D. Rena likes to complete projects before moving on to the next one.

- E. She encourages leaders to develop their potentials.
- F. Reverend White is clinically trained in Pastoral Counseling-Blanton Peale
- G. Graduate Institute and has grasped the meaning of group process and attempts to process everyone's problems in a professional manner.

Preacher

Reverend White always uses examples for clarity of scriptures. She tells stories as an instrument of developing her sermons. Sometimes she uses stories to relax or loosen up the mood of the congregation and sometimes to enliven her sermon and to get the congregation involved in a simplistic way. She also selects interesting topics to get the attention of the congregation then to dramatize the Biblical story. This style of preaching serves to inspire the parishioners. Her sermons are never long, yet she allows the Holy Spirit to use her.

Counselor

A. As a Counselor, Reverend White's experience has been mostly in parish ministry as she served in her church, Praise Temple A.M.E. She is very compassionate and concerned about the needs of the parishioners. Reverend White always made time and /or to find space to meet with members to listen or to pray for them. She sometimes stayed after worship to care for their needs. She has met with parishioners in an informal setting, designated room, while walking down the corridor, or in leadership classes. Wherever the need arises, Reverend White made herself available to the members. I have observed her in leadership seminars in crisis situation. She would interrupt the seminar to address the concerns of the congregants and to petition other members to pray with her for the person in crisis. For Reverend White, these settings were the opportunity for crisis caring to

provide help for hurting people. Often times, crises were unexpected but she encountered them without any reservation.

One of the things Reverend White likes about parish ministry is not having to wait until parishioners ask or comes to her for help, rather she believed that the professional role of clergy is to take the initiative to help those in need, those who are reluctant to ask for help. Reverend White used this approach in counseling to encourage parishioners and clients to verbalize some of their problems. Her approach in initiating support to her parishioners is done in a very loving way therefore parishioners felt compelled to seek her out. She has counseled men, women, young adults, adolescents, and young children.

A Summary of the Candidate Self-Assessment Ministerial Competencies, Style and Religious Authenticity.

Theologian

- A. My training in Biblical studies occurred at A.M.E. Ministerial Alliance Institute, Queens, New York; Master's of Divinity from New York Theological Seminary; New York Mission Societies-Black Women in Ministry Program and Blanton-Peale Graduate Institute as Pastoral Counselor. I also earned a B.A. degree in Psychology/Humanities from the College of New Rochelle.
- B. The theologians I have studied are: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Walter Brueggeman, Katie Cannon, James Cones, Cain Hope Felder, Norman Gotwald, Jacquelyn Grant, Diana L. Hayes, Sallie McFague, Keith Russell, Howard Thurman, Cornel West, Delores S. Williams and Margaret Wold.

- C. I have rendered Bible studies, leadership seminars, parenting seminars at my church.
- D. My teaching the Word of God is reflective of my witness to others, the sick and shut in.
- E. I am well versed in the doctrine of my church, the African Methodist Episcopal Denomination.
- F. I have grasped the historical development of the church as it relates to early Christians.
- G. Further, my enrollment in the Doctor of Ministry Program has afforded me the opportunity to grow and maintain my professional vitality.

Preacher

- A. The use of inclusive language in my sermons is vital to the interpretation of the Scriptures to the congregants.
- B. I tell stories as an instrument of developing my sermons to make the message more relatable.
- C. I am witty and down to earth in my sermon delivery.
- D. I select interesting topics in preaching to get the attention of the congregation.
- E. I use dramatizations of the Biblical stories that inspire the congregants to be attentive to the sermon.
- F. Preaching for me is a very serious matter and if I am distracted in the midst of preaching I will stop to refocus the congregation to be attentive to the message.
- G. I am always mindful of the audience I am preaching to, to try to project the message in a way that could be understood by the congregation.

- H. Praise Temple population consisted of single parent mothers and their children of a poverty stricken community, Morris Heights section of the Bronx. My sermon to these families was a message of hope and to encourage them in the things of God.
- I. I also taught adult leadership seminars on Sunday before worship.
- J. The Area I need to improve on: slowing down in my delivery of my message and to become more confident in extemporaneous preaching.
- K. The length of time that I preach is 15-20 minutes.

Ecumenist

- A. I have knowledge of various faiths and respect them in their beliefs and have learned to be open to them. The religions that I been affiliated with were: Muslim, Jehovah Witness, Baptist, Pentecostal, United Methodist, Catholic, Non-Denomination and Interfaith.
- B. As a seminarian of NYTS, I have gained a broader perspective of understanding other ethnic groups religious beliefs, which allow us all to learn from each other's faith tradition.
- C. I ministered in hospitals to interfaith group of employees in a (Chapel), to the sick and shut-in. My Demonstration project is a prime example of an interfaith group. This group of single parents is diverse ethnically and denominationally.

Leader

- A. I am always willing to demonstrate my leadership quality.
- B. I like to share the responsibility of leadership. An example: Every week I assigned members of the leadership to take turn in teaching the leadership seminar to help develop their gifts and ability.

- C. The candidate learned how to delegate responsibilities to others.
- D. I ministered to single parents and their children effectively. I also encourage them to have better communication skills.
- E. Candidate serves as mediator between single parents and their adolescent children.
- F. As leader, I will assess a situation and respond to the need, whether in church, family gathering or social group.

Religious Educator

- A. I use the tools of story telling in preaching.
- B. I use adult type visual aids to structure growth and to add humor to the sermons.
- C. I am effective in one-on-one dialogue with adolescents.
- D. Candidate is noted for getting others involved in group participation.
- E. I have the ability to engage children in dialogue.
- F. I held sex education seminars for adolescents using an honest open approach that provided the adolescent the freedom to dialogue with the candidate.
- G. I have the ability to diffuse martial disputes of couples and to involve them in prayer together.
- H. I conduct seminars effectively, using an agenda.
- I. I use dramatization of the Biblical characters to interact with young children.
- J. I have the ability to preach to a mixed group of young children, adolescents, and adults in the same setting.

Counselor

- A. As counselor I am very kind, compassionate and respectful of Parishioners and clients. As Counselor, there is a code of confidentiality established between counselor and

clients. The sessions are non-threatening as I display compassion toward them and their problems.

Pastor/Shepherd

- A. Reverend White's background in ministry is unique, and has been outside of the stain glass window of the church. She has ministered in the park, to the homeless, group homes, underground subway station drug addicts, prostitutes and in housing complexes. Lastly, to minister in the high rise church in the Pastor's apartment for the past sixteen years. Regardless of location of ministry, Reverend White will go to serve wherever there is a need. I have ministered in hospitals, hospices setting and to the sick and shut-in. She believes that her ministry is to help individuals to live but also to help them to die with dignity. It is her hope that when she interacts with the sick, that she will reflect the ministry of Jesus Christ. She enjoys ministering to the elderly and children. In assisting families in life, she also assists them in death by extending her services to perform funerals for those who are unable to pay her.
- B. I use effective counseling techniques to interact with parents and their children.
- C. I never meet strangers; everyone is welcome to the house of God. I am a great encourager and have a great sense of humor. She always engages adult and children in laughter.
- D. I do outreach ministry via telephone.

Administrator

- A. I try to be clear, concise in defining and analyzing whatever goal or task I am assigned. I only elaborate extensively if needed.

- B. I try to aim high through projects that can be reached.
- C. I try to be God centered, always seeking God for His guidance
- D. I delegates responsibilities to other leaders and church members.
- E. I am efficient in assigned tasks.
- F. I like to complete projects before the undertaking of another one.
- G. I encourage leaders to develop their potentials.
- H. My clinical training is in Clinical Pastoral Education at Blanton Peale Institute.
Through my experiences, skills and techniques, I understand group processes and process everyone's situation, problems and concerns in a professional manner, in my counseling in the church and at the *Family Resource Center*.
- I. I am mission minded. I have served the homeless at the Bowery Mission on Thanksgiving, also to give resources to less fortunate in my travels. In 2001, I traveled to Sierra Leone, West Africa to establish a ministry for 'Women for Women' and was instrumental in bringing one of the women to America to be fitted with prosthesis for both her legs.
- J. I am an intercessor for those in trouble, for family and friends as well. I spend time with the Lord daily.

Growing Edges

1. Improvement in delegating responsibilities in order not to carry the weight of ministries assigned to me in the church. I am a certified Pastoral Counselor for the church and the facilitator of the program: *Family Resource Center* where the needs for my services are demanding. Therefore, I have learned to delegate some of my responsibilities to some of the members and leaders to help me in my administrative duties.
2. I am working on freeing myself from non-ministerial duties of the church in order to perform other ministries.
3. Ultimately, my goal is to empower the leaders/members of the church to take the initiative to organize and become more assertive in leadership.

Areas Chosen to Improve

A. Counselor

Improvements can be made in the area of time management for counseling

B. To develop better leadership style

Competencies Selected For The Project

As a leader, I have grown in the area delegation of responsibilities. I have learned to assess situations and not to execute them on my own but to involve others to share in the process. Therefore, my workload has become lighter because I am able to delegate the workload to others in the church/site team and the Family Resource Center. I will use as a resource *The Making of a Leader* by Frank Damazio to teach site team and church leaders on preparation in helping single parents and their children.

Single parents are in need of time management, setting boundaries and taking responsibility for their lives and the lives of their children. As leaders, we will empower the potential parents as well of the responsibility of parenting.

As **Counselor**, I have developed in the areas of time management and interpersonal conflict. I no longer allow clients, family or church members to manage my time. I have become more focused and aware of scheduling clients and keeping boundaries I set. Thus, having the authority to be in charge.

Through my D. Min project, I have become empowered to confront interpersonal conflicts among staff at church, other leaders, parents and their children. I know longer try to escape problems or difficult personalities. I try to face each person's obstacles and issues presented in a professional manner with love and dignity. However I do not allow anyone to walk over me and tell me how to conduct business. In counseling, I make sure there is a continuation of follow-up process on clients. I am still using *The Biblical Concepts for Christian Counseling*, by William T. Kirwan, *Christian Counseling* by Gary Collins, Ph.D. and *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, Robert Wicks, Parsons, Caps and the main text, *Biblical Counseling with African American*, by Clarence Walker. This project has taught me how to be a better counselor through workshops by using the skills and techniques I have learned.

Evaluation

1. In December 2005, a workshop was held on leadership at River Park Towers Family Resource Center, Bronx, New York, and seven (7) members participated. I included an aim, outline and conclusion. Allowing fifteen minutes for questions and answers from the *Making of a Leader*. Participants were able to take the questionnaire

home. Some brought their questionnaire back completed, some half completed and others forgot and left their questionnaire at home. The participants were excited about the workshop and requested to have more workshops on leadership. The Biblical characters we studied were: Abraham, Hagar, Hannah, Ishmael, Isaac, Jesus, Mary (mother of Jesus) and Miriam.

2. My time management has improved tremendously. I set boundaries with the parents. Clients have to make appointments with me and not always on an emergency basis. I keep records; do assessments of each client and closely follow-up on each individual. I also allow persons to make realistic goals for themselves to analyze their situations and ask how they will best handle their situations.

This competency was evaluated in February 2005. The site team was given permission to interact with single parents of the Family Resource Center. A journal was kept on the single parents of their progress. A journal summation was read by the Site Team of Praise Temple church, in the Bronx, New York. The journal summation recorded narration of different sessions taught and responsibilities carried out.

A journal summation of my activities as a resource person, time spent with each person of the site team, dates of appointments and information shared with participants was an on-going project.

This competency was evaluated in February 2005. The core team and site team were given permission by facilitator to interact with single parents of the Family Resource Center. A journal was kept on the single parents of their progress.

Appendices

Appendix-A

BROOKLYN / WESTCHESTER
DISTRICT CONFERENCE

SUMMARY REPORT
ON
FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER
OF RIVER PARK TOWERS
HOUSING COMPLEX

BY

REV. RENA C. WHITE
ASSOCIATE MINISTER OF PRAISE TEMPLE

DR. O'NEIL MACKEY
PRESIDING ELDER

“Father of Orphans and Protector of Widows is God in His Holy Habitation. God gives the Desolate a Home to Live in, He Leads Out the Prisoners to Prosperity, but the Rebellious Live in a Parched Land.” (Pss. 68: 5-6).

The Target Area

River Park Towers’ hi-rise urban development, houses a large population of single mothers. Some of these single parents lack effective parenting skills to enable them to raise children in a healthy, educational, social, and moral environment

The Target Situation

In living in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, single parents, males and females find themselves feeling isolated from society and to experience deep psychological stress. The psychological impact of these parents and the lack of skills serve to contribute to their family breakdown.

These parents are left without resources and need outside intervention. Praise Temple A.M.E church heralds a single parent ministry that will serve to equip the River Park Towers mothers/parents with the necessary skills to assist them in raising their children and to develop their faith in God.

Some Brooklyn/Westchester, Jamaica-Long Island and Baptist colleagues witness the target situation and have caught the vision for the need of a **Family Resource Center** for single parents on our district, a ministry beyond the walls of the church. Citing the scripture, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19-20) By meeting once a week at the River Park Towers high rise development, we were able to encourage mothers spiritually, socially, pastorally and recreationally.

The importance of this group was to meet and allow participants to be consultants one to another, as they shared specific problems and challenges, as single parents.

In this support group, single parents were encouraged to discuss Their frustrations, struggles, fears, joys and successes.

Parents expressing their emotional feelings and fears. They often experienced a wonderful emotional relief.

Once a week these mothers looked forward to personal time for themselves as they sought to fulfill their own destiny as they realized that they were women with a life that precede their children’s lives. These women became empowered as they spent time replenishing themselves emotionally, socially, spiritually, and recreationally. As the parents were nurtured, they gain a deeper need for love and attention to impart to their children.

Mothers having personal time for themselves became better in helping to shape their children's social development.

The Target Aim:

The Districts Aim is to help provide community assistance through community leaders, as well as spiritual guidance to single parent families of a poverty stricken community.

Brooklyn / Westchester Target Goal:

Provide training for all participating in the Family Resource Ministry, by facilitating in workshops to educate leaders and church members regarding single parent family. Several workshops are already in effect, and training has already started in some churches to establish Family Resource Ministries.

Appendix B

THE FOLLOWING ARE A LIST OF
CHURCHES THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE
MINISTRY BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE CHURCH
SINGLE PARENTS
FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER
RIVER PARK TOWERS HOUSING COMPLEX
MORRIS HEIGHTS SECTION
OF
BRONX NEW YORK

PRAISE TEMPLE A.M.E. IN THE BRONX, NY
SAINT MATTHEWS A.M.E. IN THE BRONX
MARINERS TEMPLE BAPTIST CHURCH, MANHATTAN, NY.

The Brooklyn/Westchester District
Presiding Elder, O'Neil Mackey

To: Elder O'Neil Mackey Officers and Members of the Brooklyn/Westchester District.

Matthew 28:19-20 tells us, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, v.20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The Facilitator, Rev. Rena C. White and her Core Team/Site Team submit the following report in addressing the growing need of ministry in our community, River Park Towers, hi-rise housing complex, in the Bronx, NY.

The high populations of single parents spoke loud and clear about the future of our church. The change must take place now to serve the people of God. The Praise Temple A.M.E. church family saw the need to extend our ministry beyond the walls of the church.

The ministry of the Brooklyn/Westchester District has expanded in these areas:

A) Family Resource Center for parents & children.

B) Advocate for parents/child/children to bridge the gap of communication.

The ministry of the Family Resource Center served to bring parents and children together to address their needs. We know that many single parents are isolated, from the traditional form of ministry. These parents find themselves feeling that they are no longer a part of society. Therefore, these single parents are left without resources and need a place to turn to.

The Family Resource Ministry provides community assistance through the Church, as well as spiritual guidance, which is often lacking in the lives of single parents.

Through the Family Resource Ministry, single parents will be encouraged to come to church, or to return back to church.

As Single Parenting is on the rise, many parents are left without adequate resources and/or support. As the church becomes active in the lives of single parents, the gap between church and community is bridged.

The church must rise beyond the call, and preserve its future for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must request members of the Official Board, Pastors in all churches, and the Presiding Elder to support our efforts, for bridging the gap between church and our communities.

Praise Temple A.M.E. church applauds Rev. Rena C. White, for implementing the Family Resource Ministry in the hi-rise complex of River Park Towers of the Bronx. We are in total support of her ministry.

Humbly submitted:
Pastor Shirley R. Dowling

Steward Board

Evangelist Vergie Jackson
Licentiate Tia M. Dowling
Sis. Effie Johnson

Trustee Board

Sis. Jacqueline Baker
Sis. Raynelle Hall
Sis. Sonia Johnson

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